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Roger W. Riley  
*Illinois State University*

Douglas M. Turco  
*Illinois State University*

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# **ECOTOURISM: WHERE BUSINESS AND THE ENVIRONMENT MEET**

**BY**

**DR. ROGER W. RILEY, ASSISTANT PROFESSOR**

**AND**

**DR. DOUGLAS M. TURCO, ASSISTANT PROFESSOR**

**RECREATION AND PARKS ADMINISTRATION PROGRAM  
101 MCCORMICK HALL  
ILLINOIS STATE UNIVERSITY  
NORMAL, ILLINOIS 61790-5121**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Ecotourism has become a powerful economic segment of the wider tourism industry despite a lack of consensual definition and standards that define operating parameters. This paper explores ecotourism by reviewing the statistics of the phenomenon, potential reasons for its unprecedented growth and attempts at definitional consistency. The pejorative impacts on host cultures and the environment, and positive steps that are rectifying earlier mismanagement in both demand and supply side sectors are also considered. A final section addresses questions that need to be answered by the principles involved in the promotion and supply of the ecotourism business.

category of tourist attractions worldwide. Natural resource attractions are an important "pull factor" for many travelers and the foundation of many tourist-serving areas and recreational sites. In many tourism based communities, natural resources serve as the core attraction, drawing visitors and stimulating economic activity. For communities worldwide, the environ-mentally based sub-category of ecotourism is a means by which the promotion of natural resources can be linked to local economic development and conservation practices. Indeed, more than twenty years ago Roger Tory Peterson, a noted ornithologist wrote, "nature tourism is one of the most practical ways to save the world's wildlife and wild places from more erosive forms of exploitation" (21, p. 32).

## **INTRODUCTION**

Disney World is the most attended, man-made tourist destination in the world but natural resources constitute the largest

With increases in visitation to parks and aquatic areas, local populations can benefit from this type of tourism enterprise. Although many benefits can be realized through ecotourism, a history of overuse and underplanning have contributed to

deleterious environmental impacts. It would seem that carefully planned management actions are required for sustainable natural resource tourism. Through an evolved sense of purpose and need, ecotourism principals have begun to address these problems. Ecotourism is fast becoming a force that integrates environmental protection, local economic development and big business--three seemingly incompatible bedfellows.

While the phenomenon and effects of ecotourism are well documented, there have been a many attempts defining the parameters. An encompassing definition of ecotourism, that suits all principals involved, has been hard to pinpoint (10). Similarly, while the vast increase in ecotourism travelers has been frequently noted, little has been offered to explain tourists' motivations for undertaking these trips. This paper briefly reviews the growing phenomenon of ecotourism, offers some definitional parameters and further suggests potential motivations for eco-related travel. Further discussion reviews some of the negative impacts exerted on a burgeoning ecotourism market and also reviews current supply and demand side initiatives aimed at sustainable ecotourism attractions. Finally, some additional, and as yet unsolved issues are raised, the answering of which is left to those people most involved in creating an ecotourism future.

### **ECOTOURISM DEMAND**

Like the boom of ethnotourism in the 1980's (9), tourism to areas of natural beauty and unique ecological interest have greatly increased in the past decade. The Stanford University Research Institute reports that world tourism will increase by over 8% in

the next few years, culture and adventure tourism will increase by 10-15%, but environmental based tourism will increase by 25-30% (3). Revenues from American guided ecotourism ventures increased 15% between 1989 and 1991, and growth is expected to hold at 20-25% for the remainder of the decade. The current estimated spending on nature oriented travel is fourteen billion dollars each year, or 7% of world tourist spending (24). Additionally, eight million Americans travel to see natural destinations annually and by the year 2000, 70 percent of all tourism will be based on natural and cultural resources (26).

Ecotourism is already playing a significant part in the economic plans of some third world countries. According to the World Wildlife Fund, 47% of all tourists who visit Latin America say that nature oriented tourism played a large part in their vacations (24). These types of tourists are also said to stay longer, spend more money than beach resort travelers and are prepared to endure less than palatial accommodations (21). For Costa Rica alone, ecotourism generates \$220 million each year and has become the second highest earner of foreign currency (24). The bottom line is that ecotourism is an economic force and its one billion dollars each year is the largest source of conservation funding (15).

### **POTENTIAL REASONS FOR INCREASED DEMAND**

It has been noted that many people use tourism for a temporary escape to preferred and different environments (12). From this perspective, the burgeoning ecotourism market may stem from a societal angst about

the conditions of existence in the contemporary world. A second reason for increased ecotourism may be motivated by wishes to observe vestiges of the continually diminishing natural resource base. A third reason may be that tourists are trying to seek out natural environments in response to a media created awareness of natural resources. This media fueled awareness has been labeled, the "issue-attention cycle" (5).

In the case of the harried existence that besets citizens of first world countries, many tourists may be engaging in escapist travel by seeking options that offer contrast to their regular way of life. Indeed, "most of the world lives in homogenized urban settings,... Therefore, we want to see the rain forests and the indigenous people" (11, p. 19). This harried and homogenized existence has been documented in many different ways. Quoting the Louis Harris Poll, Schor (23) stated that an average American's leisure time has diminished from 26 hours each week in 1973, to slightly under 17 hours in 1991. Increases in the variety and complexity of obligatory activities have also usurped the time once available for leisure. Linder (18) attributed these increasing societal demands to technological development and consequent dependence. He reasoned that necessities of living require more attention in today's affluent societies. These necessities have resulted in a "scarcity of time, a more harried existence, and a marked reduction in the quality of life" (20, p. 2). It has been noted that decreases in discretionary time have caused a need for "time deepening" in leisure activities. Individuals are now trying to fit more and higher quality experiences into their diminishing leisure time (8), and some tourists are finding this higher quality experience in the embrace of natural

resources. Furthering the case of the escapist tourist phenomenon, post-modernists and other contemporary social commentators have reported an increasing hyper-reality of twenty first century life (1, 6). They say that few aspects of society can be considered real and most aspects are merely conjured images of reality. In reaction to these societal changes, it is reasoned that tourists engage in a temporary escape of their rushed and unreal existence's in order to gain control within other less harried worlds (12). Ecotourism attractions that celebrate 'a nature-in-balance' and 'a nature that runs by its own time clock', appear to be a band-aid relief to their problems. When seeking "other worlds", contemporary tourists are often searching for an authenticity not found within their own societies (4, 19). Natural environments are one type of destination that may offer some sanctuary of authenticity as some destinations have been resistant to the inauthenticating threats of humankind when compared with cultural or commercial environments. Natural environments also exude the aura of the unknown, the untamed--a vast force playing by its own rules. Within these environments, travelers may find settings they perceive to be authentic.

The second potential reason for increased ecotourism relates to concerns about widespread environmental degradation. Increasingly, tourists seek to capture views of natural attractions before they disappear. This reason for ecotourism may be an alarmist response to the current conditions and projected future of a highly consumptive world. This type of response was expressed by a respondent talking about types of leisure travel she considered to be prestigious (22). The respondent talked

about her wish to visit the natural attractions of Amboseli National Park in Kenya:

I would like to see my husband there for a safari. Not so much hunting, but photography wise. The animals and the...its just you know...one of these days it will no longer be there, it'll be gone. The opportunity will never be there...because Americans or humans have...its going to all be gone. It's so sad, there's not going to be any left one of these days for my kids to see. Elephants, zebras, its just all going to be gone. I say it because my kids...well they're not going to know what a (expletive) elephant is or any of that stuff because its not going to be there! (22, p. 80).

A third reason for increased ecotourism may be attributed to the vogue-like attention that natural resources command in today's media. The media seems to be creating public mindsets rather than reflecting them, that is, the media now leads public focus instead of reporting it (28). Downs suggests that attention on public issues, including the environment, move through cycles of high and low interest. During these "issue-attention cycles", public focus is heightened by a media-fueled frenzy (5). A case may be posited for the current interest in natural environments. People have been captured by media reports of environmental disasters, global warming, and pleas for preservation of resources. This has caused widespread public interest and one spin-off effect may be an increase in ecotourism before natural attractions subside into a sea of overuse, pollution and exploitation. It has also been said that environmental issues will stay to

the fore longer than most other issues (5). Natural disasters and the ubiquity of environment degradation will provide continuing and varied foci for media attention. In this respect, demand for ecotourism appears to have a very viable future.

### THE DILEMMA OF DEFINITION

Many ecotourism suppliers have addressed travelers' needs by offering packages that form a union between profit and conserved natural environments. From this, the associated label of ecotourism has become a popular "buzzword" for many environmentally related leisure travel opportunities. Unfortunately, ecotourism is also "becoming a catch-all vogue-word applied indiscriminately to almost anything linking tourism and nature" (7). In response to this broad and often misused umbrella label, a study was undertaken to identify, separate and define environmentally related travel opportunities. Responsible, ecological, green, clean and gentle tourism were some of many labels claiming an ecotourism connection. Using fifty-three references from academic, popular, and promotions literature, Sullivan (25) conducted a review seeking a consensual definition for ecotourism. From the resulting content analysis, all natural resource travel definitions were separated into three categories--adventure tourism, responsible tourism and ecotourism. By further analyzing the literature placed in the ecotourism category, Sullivan concluded that a single definition could not encompass all aspects of the phenomenon. Instead, the four themes of Natural Environment Attractions, Planning and Management,

Local Culture/Economy, and Learning/Awareness appeared to characterize this type of tourism (25).

From Sullivan's analysis, natural environments were the core and key source of visitors' interest. These natural attractions varied from land based flora and fauna of rain forests and lion prides, to marine ecologies like the coral reefs in the Gulf of Mexico. The natural attractions were supposedly pristine, that is, they had been minimally impacted by humankind. For the second theme of planning/management, ecotourism operations were interpreted as purposeful attempts to strategically plan and manage environmental attractions for tourism. A popular phrase associated with this planning and management strategy was "sustainable development". The phrase carried a connotation of long term use of natural resources without depleting the resources of attraction. In theme three, local cultures were also one of the ecotourism attractions. Observing indigenous cultures was a prime pull factor for first world visitors. But, more important was the partnership between local communities, governmental entities and entrepreneurs who were working to manage the environment for each sector's economic benefit. One characteristic to emerge from the analysis was the encouragement of local people to act as planners, stewards and guides for their environments rather than using them for extractive purposes. Through this relationship between local attractions and local residents, environmental and economic sustainability was more likely to occur in the face of alternative land uses. For the final theme, ecotourism was often associated with education. Through increased awareness and purposeful education about

the natural environment and local culture, it was hoped that visitors would engage in non-consumptive use.

Recent submissions of ecotourism literature agree with Sullivan's interpretations. By combining the ecotourism definitions of Boo (2), Kutay (11) and Ziffer (31), Lee and Snepenger developed a consensual interpretation describing ecotourism as an "emerging development strategy for sustainable development whereby natural resource amenities, the local community, and visitors benefit from tourism activity" (17). Unfortunately, this definition and Sullivan's interpretations have not been embraced by all stake holders of ecotourism development. Indeed, Sullivan's analysis recognized that commercially oriented publications made fewer references to the planning and educative aspects of ecotourism. When considering the goals of commercial travel operations, long term planning aspects may have been peripheral to their primary mission of profit, promotion and client service delivery (25). The planning and sustainable development aspect of ecotourism may have been less likely to be a prime attractant in promotional materials. Equally, an emphasis on the educative aspects within promotional literature might have inadvertently limited target markets. It is hoped these aspects were not purposefully de-emphasized, but were expediencies of promotion budgets.

### **PEJORATIVE IMPACTS OF ECOTOURISM DEVELOPMENT**

The positive and pejorative impacts of ecotourism are many. Positive impacts are often cited as the injection of money into local economies, employment of local

people and an increased awareness that natural environments can be maintained and managed for profit. Conversely, the other effects of ecotourism can be negative unless careful planning and the subsequent management strategies are adhered to rigorously. Some negative effects of ecotourism can include severe leakage from local economies, the loss of natural landscapes through encroaching development, and excessive use of natural environments which contributes to a disappearance or degradation of the indigenous flora and fauna. The additional problems of crowding, lack of authenticity and environmental pollution are also potential off-shoots of ecotourism (Table 1).

#### Pollution

Pollution is the most visible negative impact is related to excessive and improper ecotourism development. Air pollution can occur from motor traffic and the use of energy. Water pollution (sea, lakes, rivers, springs) results from the discharge of untreated waste water due to the absence or malfunction of adequate sewage treatment plants and the discharge of solid waste from pleasure boats. Pollution of ecotourism sites (camps, picnics, etc.) has stemmed from littering and the absence or inadequacy of waste disposal facilities--as noted by the "garbage trail enroute to Everest" (14, pp. 34). Noise pollution is often due to motor traffic or the use of certain recreation vehicles (snowmobiles, motorcycles, boats, planes, etc.) but also to the crowds of tourists themselves. For example, the numbers of helicopters flying over penguin colonies in Antarctica has increased from 800 to 7000 per annum, over the last ten years. With each flight, the penguins are harassed into the sea (15). These flights

have begun to interfere with reproduction and feeding patterns thereby affecting the penguins habitual lifestyle

#### Loss of Natural Landscape and Agricultural Lands

The growth of tourism brings with it construction of housing, facilities and infrastructure which inevitably encroach on open spaces. Some valuable natural sites (beaches, forests) can also be barred to public access because they become privately owned by hotels or individuals. The need to serve travelers in the way they are accustomed also causes a drain on local resources. In Nepal, before 1965, less than 10,000 visitors undertook mountain treks. Now, more than 25,000 visitors trek through this geographic region, bringing with them the associated needs of cooking, washing and showering, all of which require energy. The result has been a deforestation of the natural environment caused by the constant quest for firewood as energy. Locals are cutting down trees to fulfill tourists' needs and to gain valuable income. This nonsustainable consumption has moved the tree line several hundred feet up the mountain slopes (15).

#### Destruction of Flora and Fauna

The various kinds of pollution, together with the loss of landscape and agricultural lands are responsible for the disappearance of some flora and fauna. Excessive access to and the use of natural sites also results in the disappearance of various plant and animal species, due to negative ecotourist behavior (trampling, excessive picking of fruit or flowers, carelessness, vandalism, thoughtless conduct). Such is the case in the Galapagos Islands, a fragile ecosystem that

was initially limited to 25,000 visitors per year, in 1981. By 1989, more than 60,000 visitors were encroaching on the habitats of the animals. Biologists have noticed behavioral changes in many animals. Similarly, tourist mini buses have caused disturbances in Amboseli National Park, Kenya. Drivers are trying to get closer to lion prides to enhance their tips, and the disturbances are affecting lions reproductive capacities (15).

#### Altered Local Lifestyles

Ecotourism not only changes the living patterns of animals but also the lifestyles of locals. This "new colonialism" of tourism can place local people in positions of servitude, and equally, in the unenviable position of photographic curiosity pieces (14). There have also been many cases where overgenerous tourists have handed monetary gifts to locals instead of payments in exchange for services. These handouts inevitably create begging and then a tourist dependency situation (15). Finally, inhabitants of third world countries have little choice but to be impressed with the wealth of tourists. These conditions create undeniable tensions between the wish for possessing the accouterments of wealthy visitors and the simple needs of local living.

#### Lack of Resources to Fulfill Ecotourism's Promise

The problem of trying to keep induced tourism dollars in the local marketplace is not uncommon in underdeveloped countries. According to an article quoting Boo (24), many ecotourism destinations lack the start-up resources needed to take full advantage of induced tourism dollars. Lack of resources results in lost opportunities to

train local guides, develop interpretive services and, establish entrance fee systems and infrastructural/superstructural tourism services. These deficiencies are likely to be rectified by money from non-local entrepreneurs which then causes severe leakage when dollars flow back to them. It has been estimated that only 45% of tourist dollars stay in developing countries and less in smaller countries. Less than 10% of revenues are likely to stay in local areas thereby eliminating economic payback. In the Botswana ecotourism spending, that stays locally, has been estimated at less than 10% (14).

## ECOTOURISM MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

### Exemplars of Supply Side Management Initiatives

Many natural environments within the United States are currently managed to maintain their ecological integrity. However, ecotourism management successes have been most visible within third world countries. Previously, indigenous populations had little choice but to use their surrounding environment for extractive purposes. Successful ecotourism developments have convinced local populations to maintain environmental integrity while realizing long term economic benefits. According to Boo (2), each lion in Amboseli National Park is worth U.S. \$27,000 yearly to local tribes and each elephant herd has the potential to generate U.S. \$610,000 from tourist visitation. As a wildlife refuge, Amboseli is worth \$18 per acre annually, but as farmland it is worth only 36 cents per acre. In confirmation, another study estimated that Amboseli



National Park's annual income was eighteen times greater when used for tourism as opposed to beef production (30). In another case Costa Rica, devoid of national parks in 1969, has since dedicated 11% of its land mass to park land. Costa Rican parks now receive 200,000 visitors annually and the induced revenue is the second largest source of foreign currency. At Monteverde Cloud Forest, a cooperative of local women sell souvenirs and gross \$US 50,000 annually (29).

In Belize, twelve adjoining landowners were convinced to protect a colony of howler monkeys. By protecting the land from development, trees were saved and monkey hunting was banned. The monkey population increased 20% and the local people are benefiting from tourism by becoming guides (29). The guides see the value of preserved natural resources and are able to take tourists to the sites while acting as stewards of the environment (24). Similarly, but before political instability, tourists averaged \$170 each to view gorillas in the Parc Nacional des Volcans, Rwanda. This tourist attraction provided revenue to protect the habitat, prevent poaching and helped make tourism Rwanda's number two foreign currency earner. Unfortunately, it has been found that only \$150,000 of the \$1,000,000 generated, is returned to the park by the Rwandan Government (29).

Finally, the winner of the first annual Islands Ecotourism Award was a conservation program set up at Matura Beach, Trinidad. Designed to stop the poaching of leatherback turtles, a program employed eleven local youths as tour guides and to issued permits for watching the nesting turtles. By December of 1991, nearly 10,000 people had visited the area

and the restricted-area permits sold out every weekend (11).

Supply side management and planning initiatives vary greatly depending upon the parties involved. Some governmental entities are requiring that ecotourism operators submit impact plans in order to place the responsibility of stewardship on parties with the monetary resources (14). Other governments have developed fee structures for entering parks although many appear to be less successful when developing a park service infrastructure that can collect fees and monitor park activities (24). One of the universal edicts for sound ecotourism contends that local populations should be hired in as many positions as possible. Ecotourism operators, if serious about their destination's sustainability, train and employ local guides, rangers and accommodations workers. Employment allows for income to be generated in the local community and the worth of preserving natural attractions becomes apparent. Such is the case for the International Expeditions development in the Peruvian Amazon where all the guides belong to the local community. The Zimbabwe's CAMPFIRE project also employs local guides and about half of the money goes back to the local community. Similar projects have been started in Kenya with money being apportioned to locals and to the Kenyan Wildlife Service (14).

At a higher level of authority, some ecotourism principals in Brazil are now seeing the benefits of maintaining pristine environments over rampant destruction through foresting. The principals are setting rules that control a wide variety of ecotourism activities. Maximum limits are being set on the number of tourists at lodges

and the disposal of trash is undertaken by packing it out. Architectural guidelines on lodges are being established so they remain unobtrusive and have minimal visual impact (24). Finally, some ecotourism areas are requiring imported heating fuel to reduce the impact of resources culled from local environs (15).

### Demand Side Initiatives

There have been fewer efforts to manage demand side ecotourism within the parameters of, and consistent with the four ecotourism themes revealed by Sullivan. Indeed, initiatives to maintain the integrity of ecotourism have only recently been undertaken in tourist generating countries. This section focuses primarily on the efforts of The Ecotourism Society who have developed a series of guidelines for first world ecotourism operators (27). Before outlining the guidelines and strategy development it is instructive to note that several ecotourism companies are funding tree planting, research, and ecological and cultural preservation activities. Other initiatives include the National Audubon Society's "Travel Ethic for Environmentally Responsible Travel", an agreement signed by companies conducting tours under the Audubon banner. Likewise, some popular publications evaluate the integrity of tour companies with the hope that informed consumers will make correct choices with their tourism dollars (16).

"Green evaluation" is The Ecotourism Society program which asks ecotourists to evaluate the operators with whom they travel. Using a variety of ecotourism operators, natural resource management principals, academics and consultants, the Society has developed a series of questions

and checklists that are being piloted, with the cooperation of operators. The categories of investigation fall under the five areas of predeparture, guiding, monitoring, management programs and local accommodations checklists. Within each area, specific questions are asked that could alert The Ecotourism Society, should operators not follow sound ecotourism principles. An accompanying brochure is sent to operators and identifies the five areas and their respective sub categories. Each sub category is prefaced by a guideline and objectives before techniques are suggested to fulfill these objectives. Anticipated visitor benefits are offered to signify how the techniques might impact customers (27). This green evaluation is another step toward creating sustainable tourism environments where the local cultures benefit and the flora and fauna remain intact.

### ECOTOURISM ISSUES

Besides the aforementioned impacts of ecotourism, other issues remain. The concluding section poses several questions concerning ecotourism planning and development. The first questions whether host populations should be bound to the preservation or conservation of natural resources when visitors have already profited from the exploitation of their own environments? It seems contradictory for outsiders, particularly people from first world countries to dictate sustainable development when their own economies are already overconsumptive. Why should indigenous populations be held to the ideal of a pristine environment when they can see, on a regular basis, the trappings of success caused from manipulating other environments? Secondly, who should make

decisions about the planning, development and management of ecotourism destinations? Successful planning councils in other countries include all "players" involved in ecotourism--residents, federal officials, local officials, representatives of private tourism-related businesses, and environmental/conservation activist groups are all involved. These same considerations may need to be implemented in third world destinations to gain advocacy from all interested and impacted parties.

A third question asks whether the economic and environmental successes of ecotourism are all for nothing when several thousand gallons of jet and vehicle fuel are used to transport tourists to the attractions?

Finally, should external funding sources extract all ecotourism profits or should some of these profits be injected into the local economy? In communities where tourism operators and investors are headquartered outside the region, a considerable portion of

the economic stimulus generated from ecotourism "leaks" from the local economy. For example, non-resident owners of hotel property in Cortez, New Mexico, will extract from the economy a percentage of the local room sales receipts as profit. In several ecotourism-driven economies, the local government has levied taxes on lodging room and campsite sales. These lodging tax revenues are earmarked for environmental, infrastructural and super-structural maintenance and development.

Some of the futures of ecotourism have been revealed in the vignettes of this article. Action on the part of all involved in ecotourism is required to overcome these challenges and to create a preferred future for all parties involved. No longer should tourism destinations tolerate overuse and degradation when sustainable development and local economic stimulation are realizable.

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Table 1

Examples of Negative Impacts of Ecotourism

<u>Factor Involved</u>	<u>Impact on Environment</u>	<u>Consequence</u>
Overcrowding	Environmental stress, changes in animal behavior	Reduction in quality, trail erosion
Noise	Disturbance of natural sounds	Irritation to wildlife and other visitors
Powerboats	Disturbance of wildlife, noise pollution	Vulnerability during nesting seasons
	Discharge of oil/grease	Contribution to contamination
Litter	Impairment of natural scene	Aesthetic and health hazard
Careless use of fire	Forest fires	Scarring of landscape, erosion
Firewood collection	Small wildlife mortality, habitat destruction, deforestation	Ecological changes, erosion
Feeding of animals	Behavioral changes of animal	Dependence on steady food supply
Souvenir collection	Removal of natural attraction, disruption of natural process	Depletion of resource

Source: Partially adapted from Boo, 1990

Table 2

The Ecotourism Society Guidelines

**Pre departure Programs**

- Visitor Information and Education
  - preparing visitors to minimize negative impacts

**Guiding Programs**

- General Principles of Guiding Tours
  - preparing visitors for cultural and environmental encounters
- Prevention of Environmental Impacts
  - programs aimed preventing and correcting environmental impacts
- Prevention of Cultural Impacts
  - programs aimed preventing and correcting cultural impacts

**Monitoring Programs**

- Prevention of Accumulated Impacts of Tourism
  - use of leadership and small groups to minimize impacts
  - avoidance of undermanaged and over visited areas

**Management Programs**

- Prevention of Nature Company Impacts
- Training
- Conservation Contribution Programs
- Local Employment and Jobs Program

**Local Accommodations Checklist**

Figure 1

Ecotourism Planning Model

