



Business or leisure? Economic development and resource protection—Concepts and practices in sustainable ecotourism

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Available online 7 April 2009

ABSTRACT

Ecotourism has proven to be an effective concept in the sustainable utilization of natural resources and development of various communities. Often regarded as an economic justification for resource conservation, ecotourism is providing a concept that is easily understood and appreciated by local communities and stakeholders.

However, ecotourism is still a business methodology that can be subjected to misunderstanding, abuse and misrepresentation which could also lead to negative environmental and sociocultural impacts.

Thus, environmental concepts coupled with social, cultural, and economic considerations should be developed and practiced by institutions wishing to utilize ecotourism as a conservation tool. These concepts would include optimizing the environmental and socioeconomic benefits while at the same time, prevent or minimize compromising the ecological and social values in the destinations. Some of the often-cited concepts include the determination of carrying capacity and the prevention of economic leakage supposedly brought in by the tourism industry. Also introduced in the paper is the concept of the firewalls of ecotourism wherein the introduction of different protection and conservation components is instituted in the operation of ecotourism sites.

Ecotourism has been helping save whales, dolphins, birds, turtles and fragile ecosystems. This is made possible by the fact that ecotourism provides the tangible economic aspect of conservation. However, the same recreation industry can also undo the gains of true ecotourism development through irresponsible tourism development and lack of conceptual frameworks to help guide the destination managers. To help drive sustainable resource utilization through ecotourism, there is a consistent need to develop and apply concepts and practices designed to help protect the resources from the potential impacts of the travel industry.

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1. Introduction

Even in the early stages of modern tourism, it has been recognized, although with varying levels of ambiguity, that the industry should be able to contribute to environmental conservation in view of the fact that it benefits largely from the natural resources in many destinations. The role of the tourism industry in environmental conservation, sustainable resource utilization, and socio-economic equity was given concrete representation when the term **ecotourism** was coined in the mid-1980s. Other terms such as *Alternative Tourism*, *Nature Tourism*, *Low Impact Tourism* were actually experimented on before **ecotourism** was largely accepted by both the environment and tourism sectors as the most palatable

term that can be used to justify or champion the continued use of natural areas for recreation.

Some of the premises of **ecotourism** include the following:

As a concept: Low impact, ethical and equitable distribution of economic benefits

As an activity: Visit to natural areas

National parks in many countries are established ostensibly to help protect their environmental functions and their biological diversity. But both by accident or design, recreation becomes a major management concern or tool in many of the national parks. These areas either gain management effectiveness through increased economic input, or become smothered both by the huge numbers of visitors and their corresponding impacts. To the uninitiated, this situation could become a huge matter that is difficult to embrace and uphold. *For how can you proudly declare*

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success in keeping a pristine environment when there are more people than wildlife in a protected area?

In the tourism industry, this situation is not really a phenomenon. This is just a manifestation of the human need for fulfillment (esteem and actualization) which is clearly illustrated in Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Fig. 1). Having the basic needs fulfilled and with enough disposable time and income, many people would make travel as an activity to fulfill their need for self-fulfillment. The World Tourism Organization's data that states that there were more than 760 million global tourists in the year 2005 [2] further supports the abovementioned statement.

In the early days, ecotourism attracted a highly niched market segment which limited tourist types to scientists, explorers, adventurers, and students. Early studies indicated that only 10% of the total tourist market could be considered as ecotourists. This could have provided comfort to the environment sector which seeks to accommodate manageable or even limited numbers of visitors to natural areas.

Alas, tourism is a highly dynamic industry that as soon as ecotourism became a buzzword, the market mix caught up with the ecotourists and became highly diversified. Because ecotourism is a high profile segment of the industry with many offering quality experience, service, and unique amenities, the market segments wanting to go to ecotourism sites quickly evolved to include now the mass market. The industry can no longer rely on the high environmental and ethical values of the ecotourists that result to zero or minimal environmental and social impacts to the ecotourism destinations. Mass tourist markets have started to make inroads to the pristine, natural areas. Ecotourism in a number of areas are becoming too successful that the mass tourist market now threatens to smother the destinations.

Another issue is that many managers of natural sites are also starting to realize that an appropriate market volume would have to be attained in order to create significant positive impacts to the areas. The market volume is usually very hard to achieve given the low numbers of actual ecotourists. The segment that can deliver this volume is still offered by the mass market. This created hesitation in the environment sector which recognizes the economic benefits of tourism, but at the same time could create socio-environmental problems to the natural areas.

The corresponding degrees of potential impacts of the ecotourists and the mass market are illustrated in Fig. 2.

In this regard, ecotourism can be considered as a tool that can provide both positive and negative outcomes when tourism begins to be an active industry in a natural area. As a positive tool, it can help protect natural sites, increase environmental awareness, and open windows for monetary generation that can then

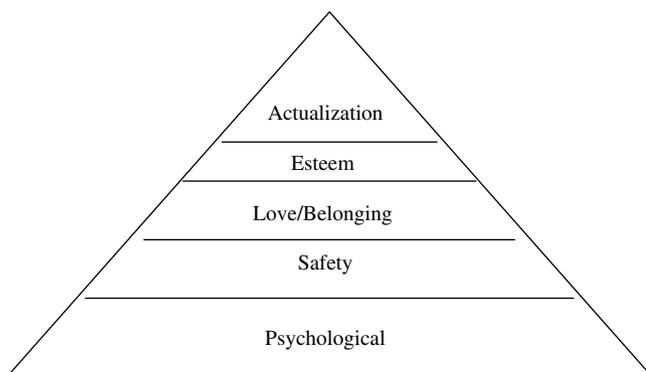


Fig. 1. Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Source: [1].

translate to management resources. As a negative outcome, ecotourism could help bring in more people, compromise ecological functions, cause behavior modification on the wildlife, and create social problems.

But no matter how daunting the prospects of ecotourism in a natural environment are, there is no denying that it can be a potent industry in natural resource utilization. It is an industry that can either make or break the environmental integrity in any given destination.

2. Basic concepts

It is imperative that in order to guard the natural sites from the impacts of tourism (while at the same time promoting them for ecotourism), basic concepts will have to be appreciated by the stakeholders. Some of these include the following.

2.1. Ecotourism (or tourism) is a business industry

No matter what the motivation is for the opening up of a natural area for recreation, the bottom line is that a major effort in managing the site should be focused on running it like a business. Ecotourism is often promoted as an economic justification for conservation. This holds true in almost all aspects. Fishermen who go into dynamite fishing or catching dolphins and manta rays would not totally stop their activities and shift into tourism if they realize that it would give them less income. Government entities that put up huge resources setting up tourist facilities without ensuring the economic returns even for maintenance would realize that they built white elephants. Nongovernment organizations that go into ecotourism would realize later on that they would have to withdraw from their sites without making inroads because all the resources they utilized were just grant money.

2.2. Tourism is a networked industry

Tourism development and control cannot be done by a single entity. Marketing will have to be done by tour operators, accommodation by private entities or local communities, and policies by various government agencies. A common pitfall of environmental organizations going into ecotourism development is that they fail to recognize the roles of other stakeholders and their inherent dynamics.

2.3. Tourism is a market-driven industry

An attraction would have a corresponding market segment. Each would have its own set of characteristics and preferences. Thus, programs and facilities should be geared towards fulfilling the needs of the appropriate market segment. Some destinations suffer the consequences of popularity and uniqueness that large market volumes may visit them even if the sites cannot accommodate such amount of visitors. In the tourism industry, it is an accepted fact that even if an area is not promoted and there is keen interest for a tourist market and enough industry service providers, people would go to the area anyways. Thus, if the area is not prepared for tourism, it could suffer the full negative impacts of the industry.

3. The flow of economic impacts of ecotourism

Another issue that puts legitimate question to the effectiveness of ecotourism as a socioeconomic and environmental tool is the equitability of income distribution from tourist expenditures. While a particular destination could bring in a hundred thousand

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