second edition

ecotourism

Impacts, Potentials and Possibilities

Stephen Wearing and John Neil

Ecotourism: Impacts, Potentials and Possibilities?

Second Edition

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Preface to the Second Edition

It has now been 10 years since the first edition of *Ecotourism: Impacts, potentials and possibilities* was published. In that time ecotourism has been transformed both within tourism studies and more widely in the tourism industry. In the academic realm there has been an exponential growth in the publication of books on the topic of ecotourism, and in 2002 the first edition of the *Journal of Ecotourism* was published; 2002 was also proclaimed the International Year of Ecotourism by the United Nations. In his opening address marking the occasion, the World Tourism Organization (WTO) Secretary-General Francesco Frangialli noted the increasing growth of the ecotourism industry, and the prominent role ecotourism will play around the world in securing the future of the tourism industry.

There have also been significant developments in international environmental policy and international political agreement on a range of environmental issues. The most prominent being climate change, which has now become the single biggest issue on the international political agenda. In February 2007, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change released its findings indicating that there is a 90% chance that global warming is caused by human-induced factors and that it is the biggest environmental catastrophe to ever face the planet. Also in 2007, Al Gore (the former United States Vice President and climate change documentary filmmaker) and Rajendra Prachandra (representing the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) were co-recipients of the Nobel Peace Prize.

Confronted with these and other challenges ecotourism has gone from fringe to significant player within the tourism industry. The second edition of *Ecotourism: Impacts, potentials and possibilities* comes at an important time as ecotourism seeks to cement its place within the industry as a viable alternative to more mainstream approaches.

The second edition keeps its original structure with Chapter 7 containing three new major case studies, the first on the Kokoda Track, Papua New Guinea, the second on porters in Nepal and the third by Jess Ponting on surfing tourism in Indonesia's Mentawai Islands. This edition has added seven new mini case studies (which are found throughout the text) as well as a revision and update of those that were retained from the first edition. Given the breadth and depth of new knowledge published in ecotourism since the first edition, the new edition contains references from over 300 new sources.

Readers will also note an added 'Further readings' section at the end of each chapter for those wishing to pursue more in-depth and specific reading on the topics presented. There is also an updated glossary and another new section at the end of the book that provides web links to ecotourism organizations and other sustainable tourism resources.

Introduction

Ecotourism? A simple enough word but a complex and often contradictory concept: A fashion, a fad? – *Ecological travel is the 'next big thing'; the hippest way to travel is to backpack off the beaten track to experience 'nature' up close and personal (with all the luxuries of home included).*

Or a way for tourism to market itself in the twenty-first century where environmental issues now top the international political agenda? – *Conservation issues are now at the forefront of public opinion. Global warming, the decline of rainforests, loss of endangered species, and land degradation have galvanized public support for conservation worldwide.*

Whatever the origins, nature is calling and we are responding in droves. And ecotourists are leading the charge. But getting 'off the beaten track' often means that the track soon becomes a road, even a highway. And the beautiful wild spaces sought after by ecotourists are often fragile and sensitive to human impact, however 'lightly we tread'. One thing, however, is certain, the increasing global interest and exponential growth in ecotourism cannot simply be explained as another in a long line of recreational trends. Instead it reflects a fundamental shift in the way human beings view and engage with nature. We have begun with a lot of questions and no easy answers yet in sight. Where would you dare start? Well why not the word itself – *Ecotourism*: Within this word exists two seemingly contradictory meanings. Let us take the most obvious: *Tourism*. Tourism is currently the world's largest industry. For example, the number of international arrivals shows an evolution from a mere 25 million in 1950 to an estimated 806 million in 2005, corresponding to an average annual growth rate of 6.5% (WTO, 2007).

Travel and tourism consumption, investment, government spending, and exports are expected to grow by 4.6% (in real terms) and total US$6.5 trillion in 2006. The 10-year annualized growth (2007–2016) forecast is 4.2% per annum illustrating the outlook for strong long-term growth. The travel and tourism industry (direct and indirect) is expected to create nearly 10 million new jobs for the world in 2005, for a total of 234.3 million jobs dependent on travel and tourism worldwide (WTTC, 2006: 4).

For these reasons alone tourism is valued highly by many countries and in many cases holds a very prominent position in development strategies.

It is actively promoted and industry bodies are courted by governments due to its potential to significantly bolster foreign exchange and domestic employment.

Increases in leisure time, the growth in real income, mobility, technological improvements in communications and international transportation, and demographic changes in the West have led to the strong global demand for tourism (Godbey and Robinson, 1997). This growth has significant implications for developing countries, which are attracting an increasing share of global international tourist arrivals from 20.8% in 1973 to 42% in 2000 (WTO, 2002). This represents an important source of foreign exchange, as tourism has become the principle export earner for 83% of developing countries. For the world's 40 poorest countries, tourism is the second most important source of foreign exchange after oil (Mastny, 2001).

Travel to developing countries has been greatly stimulated by deregulation in the airline industry, leading to increased competition and cheaper air travel, which puts the world within easier reach of the modern-day tourist. Over one-third of the people who now holiday abroad do so in the developing world because it offers a cheaper alternative to domestic holidays or holidays in other developed countries. Moreover the majority of the world's developing nations tend to be situated in climates which attract 'sun-lust' tourists wanting to escape the northern hemisphere winter.

And somewhere in this tourism 'explosion' lies ecotourism. 'Ecotourism' has evolved into a type of specialty travel, incorporating a diverse (and often bewildering) array of activities and tourism types, from bird watching, scientific study, photography, diving, trekking, to regeneration of damaged ecosystems. It is a broad and loose garment this word 'ecotourism'. For some it is a subset of 'nature-based' tourism activities; for others it is a 'niche' market, a specific type of 'special interest tourism'. In a relatively short period of time it has caught the imagination of many local communities, governments, and international environmental organizations. Ecotourism has also been able to capitalize on the increased motivations to experience and preserve natural environments, which stem in part from more fundamental changes in societal values (Blamey, 1995; Diamantis, 2004). Research indicates that 60–90% of USA, Australian, and British tourists consider active protection of the environment, including support of local communities, to be a part of a tourist destination responsibilities (Chafe, 2005). The continuation of these fundamental changes, particularly in developing countries, should lead to continued growth in demand for ecotourism (Jenner and Smith, 1992; Higgins, 1996).

Estimates of ecotourism's growth are extremely variable at the present time, but range anywhere between 10 and 30%[1] (Kallen, 1990; Vickland, 1989). Despite this variability, the tourism industry has wholly embraced ecotourism, even to the extent of the United Nations designating 2002 'The Year of Ecotourism'.

In a multifaceted world something can mean anything depending on how the light strikes it. So let us narrow the prism and focus on the prefix – ***eco*** – from the word 'ecology' which itself is derived from the Greek word *oikos* meaning house or habitat. The environment that we humans inhabit is, at its most fundamental, our home, our dwelling, or our life support. And despite the relative newness of the term, ecotourism's origins are deeply rooted in a form of environmental experience, as both a philosophy and an experience, and its philosophical heritage is embraced by conservationists and environmentalists alike. The environmental movement was born from the nature conservation movement, which recognized that nature is essential to human well-being. In recent years this conviction has been strengthened by the scientific understanding that biodiversity is essential to not only well-being, but to human survival also. Many have also articulated the need for nature to be conserved regardless of any utility or value to humans but because nature has a right to exist and conversely the human species does not have the right to determine the fate of all other species (Nash, 1989).

But tourism involves travel away from our origin, from our individual homes, into dwellings that are not our own, but that may be constructed specifically for tourists; to places that we tread upon which are a life support for 'others' both human and non-human. The world is a stage across which wealthy people stride, relentlessly striving to satisfy our desire, traveling across the globe to experience these 'others' – cultures, nature, sights, sounds and smells – to see sights that are unusual, to explore the unknown, the alien, the 'magical'. The not-here.

This book embarks on a journey of our own, a journey in understanding that will, through the following pages, take us across the globe. We will be making stops along the way: visiting countries such as Australia, Laos, Nepal, the Arctic, Indonesia, Papua New Guinea and Africa. The initial part of this journey takes place in Chapter 1 where we will discuss ecotourism's key principles. Fundamentally ecotourism involves travel to relatively undisturbed or protected natural areas, fostering understanding, appreciation and conservation of the flora, fauna, geology and ecosystems of an area. The

[1] As we shall see, the diversity of tourism forms and controversies in classification partly explain the difficulties and variability in estimating the size of the ecotourism market.

fauna, geology and ecosystems of an area highlight the nature-based element of ecotourism. But ecotourism is not defined by this relationship alone. Biological and physical features are central to ecotourism therefore the conservation of natural areas and sustainable resource management are therefore essential for planning, development and management of ecotourism. However, it also involves the notion that the activity of ecotourism must positively contribute to conservation in the destination area or host community. The understanding that ecotourism has the potential to create support for conservation objectives in both the host community and in the visitor alike, through establishing and sustaining links between the tourism industry, local communities and protected areas will provide the basis for our journey and leads us into understanding the central issues of conservation and sustainability of natural and social environments.

Chapter 2 places ecotourism within its historical context to connect it to the major philosophic and social currents that have contributed to its development. We focus here specifically on the human–nature relationship and the interaction between them as this will help us to understand the shift in the way nature is valued, both historically and philosophically, and how ecotourism fits into this change in values.

In the dominant free market economies of the developed world policy implications are heavily influenced by the interplay of government regulation and market forces. Chapter 3 examines why tourism is attractive for governments particularly in its potential for providing an alternative to traditional industry such as forestry, mining, fishing and agriculture. However, in many cases tourism has not lived up to its high expectations as its benefits are often circumscribed by the significant impacts tourism engenders upon ecosystems and local communities. Tourism is often promoted by government or industry without an overall strategy, without adequate attention to legislative frameworks, without consultation or inclusion of local communities and without effective protected area management plans. We will examine the key policy issues related to ecotourism including a discussion of mechanisms to ensure that it does not exceed its sustainable base, in moving toward understanding the provision of infrastructure for development and the policy and institutional prerequisites for planning and managing ecotourism.

Nowhere are the conflicting views over ecotourism more evident than the current debate over the function and purpose of protected areas. It is a conflict over two primary orientations; 'preservation' versus 'use' and tourism in protected areas embodies precisely this dilemma. Such an opposition is illustrated and reinforced through accepted institutional

arrangements in which tourism and conservation goals are pursued by independent organizations. The current focus of the debate on tourism in parks is the extension of a long controversy, a controversy that has existed since the conception of protected areas and equivalent reserves. The imperative for conservation advocates becomes *how* to conserve rather than whether or not to conserve. In this way ecotourism, as a sustainable development strategy, is increasingly being turned to as part of a political philosophy for protected area managers and conservation agencies as a means of providing practical outcomes in the struggle to provide a basis for continued protection for these areas.

Chapter 5 introduces the key elements of interpretation and education which help us to differentiate ecotourism from other forms of nature-based tourism. A focus on the dimensions of visitor experience reveals that the visitor is concerned not with simply looking at a setting or object, but with feeling and realizing some of its *value*. In this way, interpretation is oriented toward a visitor's cognitive and emotional state in order to raise awareness, enhance understanding, lead to positive environmental behaviors and hopefully, clarify or enlarge each participant's perspective and attitude. In this way, interpretation is essential to conservation goals and therefore central to ecotourism.

The tourism industry makes extensive use of natural assets such as forests, reefs, beaches, mountains and parks, but what does it contribute to the management of these assets? The provision of tourism infrastructure, and the costs of managing the impact of tourism on host communities, is often borne by the environment, the community itself and the government. Local communities are particularly vulnerable to the deleterious impacts of tourism development – especially indigenous or traditional custodians – as they directly experience the socio-cultural impacts of tourism. In many cases indigenous cultures are used extensively to promote destinations to overseas markets yet many indigenous people rightly feel that the tourism industry has a poor track record, in disregarding their legitimate interests and rights, and profiting from their cultural knowledge and heritage.

Chapter 6 explores ecotourism's relationship to local communities, particularly as an alternative form of development that is able to satisfy conservation and sustainability objectives. Features of the natural and cultural environments and supportive host communities are the foundations of a successful industry. Neglect of conservation and quality of life issues threatens the very basis of local populations and a viable and sustainable tourism industry.

Chapter 7 presents three new case studies to give an operational context to what has been presented in the previous chapters of the book. The first

case study investigates trekking on the Kokoda Track in Papua New Guinea. Trekking and tourism in this part of the world is a wholly new phenomenon, having only begun 10 years ago. The case study follows the drafting and implementation of the Ecotrekking Strategy for the area which emphasizes the involvement and ownership of the venture by local communities along the track and the conservation of the areas unique environmental and cultural conditions. The second case study like the first investigates trekking, albeit in the much more developed context of Nepal. It is argued that an important issue of sustainability for tourism in Nepal is the safety and treatment of the local porters who are integral to the industry as they ferry loads of food, water, fuel, tents and trekkers' personal belongings over some of the most rugged terrain in the world. The third case study by Jess Ponting explores surfing tourism in the Mentawai Islands of Indonesia. Surfing tourism has grown rapidly in this part of the world due to the significant attentions the islands have received in the surf media over the last 15 years. Living conditions in the Mentawai Islands are highly impoverished; however, local communities have been largely excluded from participating in the industry in any meaningful way despite legislation by the provincial government. Ponting outlines an alternative vision for how local Mentawai Islander's could be involved by developing linkages between surfing tourism and local transport, retail and agricultural industries.

The global political agenda is increasingly being dominated by economic principles which serve to actively promote the ever increasing consumption of resources in the West, even at a time of growing environmental consciousness. Chapter 8 explores the relationship between ecotourism and one of the fundamental tools to enhance consumption and marketing. We examine the structure and nature of marketing in the tourism industry, focusing particularly on understanding and evaluating the connection between ecotourism and marketing – the issue of supply versus demand-driven marketing. Pivotal to understanding the marketing relationship to ecotourism are the implications for protected areas, conservation and local communities. Ecotourism marketing has been surrounded by much confusion and controversy as it attempts to take into account the dual objectives of protected areas and local communities on the one hand and those of the tourism industry on the other.

By analyzing the market of ecotourism we find a new group of tourism clients, the ecotourists. In Chapter 9 we examine who they are and what they are demanding. We will explore the characteristics that differentiate ecotourists through an analysis of tourist motivation, demographic and psychographic characteristics, the needs of ecotourists, the images and attitudes ecotourists ascribe to a destination, and the influence of social, cultural and physical environments.

Ecotourism is argued as a catalyst for change and this book will explore broad issues such as ecology, biodiversity, bioregionalism, economic rationalism, equity of access, approaches to management of protected areas, social policy, directions of the tourism industry and local communities. Central to all of these areas is the question of sustainability and its centrality to development. Sustainable development underpins questions of resource use, not only in providing income benefits to a region but also for the preservation of social infrastructure and biosphere conservation. Chapter 10 discusses these issues in relation to ecotourism as a model for sustainable development.

But what of the future? Despite ecotourism's potential as a model for sustainable development we need to be aware of ecotourism's future direction. Frameworks are needed in which to evaluate ecotourism, mindful that economic benefits from tourism often create insufficient incentives for local communities to support conservation. Benefits are often offset in the eyes of the local communities by the intrusion of tourists, greater income inequality within and between local communities, increased pollution, sequestering of profits from outsiders and rising local prices.

Without continual questioning and evaluation of alternative evaluative frameworks we risk losing the impetus of change that ecotourism offers. Traditional approaches are often resistant to new approaches to operational and institutional arrangements. Without adequate regulation of private sector activities and sound protected area management, ecotourism development may have adverse impacts on the resource base upon which it depends. However, a viable tourism practice needs to address the imperatives of the market. Alternative approaches in areas like research, management, marketing and planning can provide new answers to perennial questions that may keep ecotourism at the cutting edge of change in society.

In spite of the complexities of these issues, ecotourism is one of the few areas where the link between economic development and conservation of natural areas is clear and direct and we need to keep this at the forefront of our minds as we undertake our learning journey.

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