

Forum: Environmental Committee

Issue: Supporting ecotourism to help diminish the negative effects of tourism

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INTRODUCTION

Tourism is often regarded as a contributor to a region's economic activity. It boosts prosperity in the visited region, as well as providing job opportunities to its locals. However, when touristic activities are unsustainable, they have dreadful consequences on the environment that many authorities choose to turn a blind eye to. When the tourist industry neglects the legal barriers and ethical concerns regarding the environmental aspect of their business for the sake of earning more profit, it leads to extensive degradation of the environment. If the number of tourists in an area is greater than the capacity of the local environment, the consequences for the latter are dramatic. According to the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the three main environmental issues regarding tourism are: the depletion of natural resources, pollution and physical degradation.

The depletion of natural resources is a great concern, especially in regions where resources are already scarce or do not exist in accessible forms. Water in particular is considered a critical natural resource. Overall, it is overused in consumerist facilities, like hotels, swimming pools and golf courses.

Tourists also tend to overuse water for personal use, even in dry and hot regions, where water scarcity is a major concern. The tourism industry can also strain land resources, such as minerals, fossil fuels, fertile soil, forests, wetlands and wildlife. As more tourism and



Image 1 - deforestation while constructing mass tourism facilities

recreational facilities get built, their construction poses a more severe threat to wildlife and local ecosystems. Land resources, such as forests, are also affected when used as building materials or cut down for fuel. Tourist attractions and accommodations are also dependent on energy resources for their heating, hot water and electricity needs.

Pollution in the tourism industry comes in various forms: solid waste, oil and chemicals, litter, emissions, sewage, noise, and light pollution. In terms of CO₂

emissions, tourism causes 5% of the global total. Road, air, and rail transportation are the main means of travel among tourists, and the transport sector of tourism accounts for 75% of the global total emissions. Unfortunately, the use of fossil fuels has detrimental effects on the environment speeding up climate change. Noise pollution also arises from transportation. Noisy tourist destinations and thoroughfares distress wildlife. Improper disposal of waste is also a form of pollution, especially in places with high number of tourists. Solid waste and littering can degrade ecosystems and spoil the physical appearance of the landscape. Aside from the territorial consequences, marine litter can harm marine life. As more tourism facilities are built, sewage pollution, due to incompetent enforcement of the law, increases. Sewage runoff in seas, rivers, and lakes damages wildlife and ecosystems, such as coral reefs.

Several ecosystems are often threatened because they are attractive places to developers and tourists. Construction and infrastructure projects can include extensive paving, wetland draining, land reclamation, marine development, sand mining, and deforestation. Unsustainable land use practices driven by a desire to earn financial gain can lead to natural disasters, such as soil erosion. Not only is the physical environment under threat, but organisms living in it and their natural cycles are also affected.



Image 2 - An ecotourist who does not harm the environment while travelling

Alterations in ecosystems can lead to destructions in the long term.

Due to this ecocide, the local population, fauna and flora of the region suffer tremendously, which makes the need for supporting ecotourism more vital than ever. When carried out at its best, ecotourism is directed towards conscientiously travelling to pristine — often threatened— natural habitats and by this, creating livelihoods to the region's locals and supporting the conservation efforts there. It can be considered a combined, creative way of meeting the goals of economic

development and ecological
conservation.

DEFINITION OF KEY-TERMS

Abatement

Reducing the degree of intensity of pollution or even eliminating it. It is done either by removing hazardous substances completely or lessening their effect through adopting environmentally friendly practices or better waste management.

Conservation Enterprises

Income generating commercial activities that focus on conserving natural resources and ecosystems. Measuring and regulating the environmental impact of these enterprises is the key to making sure that they serve their aim and do not become tools of mass tourism in the process.

Ecolabelling

An ecolabel identifies a product, service, company, or destination proven environmentally preferable on the basis of its “acceptable” level of environmental impact. An ecoquality label tells the state of the environmental quality, such as the quality of water for beaches or quality of wildlife in national parks.

Ecotourism

Small-scale tourism in pristine, fragile, and protected areas that aims to have a low impact on the environment, support local communities and allow tourists to learn about the natural and cultural riches of the region

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Origins

Ecotourism and other forms of sustainable travel have their origins in the environmental movement of the 1970s. It was not until the late 1980s that ecotourism became prevalent as a way of travelling. Back then, the rise of environmentalist thoughts and widespread environmental awareness

opposing the human built, consumerist tourist facilities made ecotourism desirable. Since the 1980s, a myriad of organizations practicing in the field of ecotourism have emerged and many people have become experts on the concept.

Principles of Ecotourism

Due to the increasing demand for exploring and environmental adventure travel, various types of trips are now being classified again as ecotourism for commercial purposes. Most of these do not comply with the principles of ecotourism because they do not support conservation in financial terms, require education—or at least, basic awareness of the facts in the region—, aim for low impact travel, or result in social and cultural participation in the areas visited. Hence, in order to be truly considered ecotourism, a trip must meet the following principles outlined by the International Ecotourism Society:

- Minimize the impact of visiting the location (i.e., preferred ways of transportation and accommodation).
- Build respect for and awareness of the environment and cultural practices.
- Ensure that the tourism provides positive experiences for both the visitors and the hosts.
- Provide direct financial aid for conservation.
- Provide financial aid, empowerment and other benefits for local people.
- Generate financial benefits for both local people and private industry.
- Deliver memorable interpretative experiences to visitors that help raise sensitivity to host countries' political, environmental, and social climates.
- Design, construct and operate low-impact facilities.
- Recognize the rights and spiritual beliefs of the indigenous people in your community and work in partnership with them to create empowerment.

In order to maintain the sustainability of ecotourism, it is essential that travelers are aware of the principles that make a trip fall into the category of ecotourism and intend to partner with travel companies that uphold the same values.

Knowing and internalizing these principles helps one capture the difference ecotourism can make in diminishing the negative effects of tourism, as well as come up with ideas that will enhance the way they are executed.

Opportunities for ecotourism are present in various locations around the world and the content of the trips can differ as well. As a biodiversity hotspot, Madagascar is among the famous ecotourist destinations. The island also strives for environmental conservation and is committed to reducing



Image 3 - Ecotourists meet the locals

poverty. According to Conservation International, 90% of Madagascar's plants and 80% of its animals are endemic to the country. Since the island's government is committed to conservation, they allow ecotourism in small numbers and this is primarily due to the funds it creates for future activities. In addition, this tourist revenue also plays a role in reducing the country's poverty and creating job opportunities for the locals who have an extensive knowledge of the area and the species that inhabit it.

Some Benefits of Ecotourism

- Ecotourism is an opportunity for tourists, as well as environmentalists, to learn more about the ecosystems, biology, and geology of the region they are visiting. Getting to know the components of an ecosystem can lead to a better understanding of how to conserve it. The powerful firsthand experience that ecotourism provides in regard to leading sustainable lives and carrying out eco-friendly practices is essential for creating environmental awareness.
- Most ecotourism programs have an educational aspect of environment conservation. The tourists can help spread environmental awareness by applying the knowledge they acquired to their daily lives.
- Ecotourism can contribute to sustainable economic growth for countries, like Madagascar, Nepal, Costa Rica, and Ecuador rely on tourists to build their economies without harming the environment in the process. Regular tourism usually returns only about 20% of revenue to local communities, whereas ecotourism can return as much as 95%. It also provides economic support through employment, but not at the expense of the environment.
- As well as creating job opportunities



Image 4 - a member of the local community employed as a guide

for locals, ecotourism promotes and preserves

traditional practices. Locally grown food and crafted goods form a direct economic and cultural correlation between the tourists and the locals. Ecotourism tends to stimulate and promote these traditions rather than altering them to fit specific international norms. Some consider ecotourism to be a means to end cultural ignorance, stereotyping, labelling and pointless fear in the world through its ability to educate travelers and expose them to the native way of life in the area they visit.

- In an economic cycle, where businesses exploit natural resources for their own financial incentives, ecotourism introduces the idea of natural resource management

to the global forum. The wealth of less economically developed countries is often dependent on natural resources, like forests, minerals and arable land. Exploiting these resources to meet a high demand often means altering or even destroying wildlife habitats and natural landscapes. In contrast, ecotourism aims at using a responsible mindset to extract natural resources in the most efficient and sustainable way possible.

- When people prefer ecotourism, some of the money spent in the cause support conservation efforts, like reforestation and endangered species' repopulation projects.

Some Criticisms of Ecotourism

- Ecotourism has also become a marketing strategy for large corporations and travel agencies. Many of the areas used for ecotourism in Kenya, Tanzania, and other African countries are either under the protection of or are owned by these tourism corporations. Local communities rarely —if ever— gain any proper benefit from ecotourism in these areas.
- Commercial ecotourism is converting untouched territories into national parks. Some of the lands in East Africa have been turned into wildlife reserves, which require roads, infrastructure, and lodges, fragmenting wildlife habitats and leaving permanent footprints on the environment, which goes completely against the principles of ecotourism. More and more land is being privatized and as a result the indigenous people lose their livestock and sink into poverty.
- There are many people who claim that ethnicity, cultural heritage and traditions are affected by ecotourism due to being exposed to the international community.
- The terms "nature," "low impact," "bio," and "green" tourism are often used interchangeably with "ecotourism;" however, these do not usually meet the principles defined by organizations, like the Nature



Image 5 - Ecotourism gone wrong due to excessive entry to a protected site

Conservancy or the International
Ecotourism Society.

MAJOR COUNTRIES AND ORGANIZATIONS INVOLVED

Costa Rica

By the early 1990s, Costa Rica was known as one of the pioneers of ecotourism. The country is among many developing nations that consider ecotourism a way of benefiting from the growing demand for sustainable travelling. Ecotourism attracts tourists from all around the world to visit the numerous national parks and protected areas in the country. Costa Rica is internationally recognized as one of the few countries with true ecotourism practices.

The rise of ecotourism in Costa Rica over the past decades has resulted in a considerable expansion of the job market. This has allowed the local population to generate income and have more employment options. Statistics show that at both the local and national level, the ecotourism industry has offered residents almost double the monthly salary compared to that in other commonly preferred professions in the region. Furthermore, local communities and schools have received significant amounts of investment and donation from tourists. As a result, the living conditions of many Costa Ricans were enhanced and modernized. Unfortunately, it cannot be said that all citizens feel they have benefited from a relatively successful economy.

Kenya

The massive support for ecotourism in Kenya comes from companies committed to preserving Kenya's natural resources and empowering local communities, as well as the government and people. Basecamp Foundation, for instance, is a nonprofit organization that partners with local communities and various companies to create and maintain "sustainable destinations" in Kenya and other developing countries emphasizing the positive impact tourism can have on the social, natural and economic environment. Ecotourism Kenya (EK) is another organization committed to raising environmental awareness through community outreach performing extensive research projects, planning sustainable tourism campaigns, and conducting environmental/social audits. EK works in partnership with many professionals from its membership, with support from the Ministry of

Tourism, Kenya Tourism Board and tourism practitioners.

The International Ecotourism Society (TIES)

Through an international link of industry professionals and business leaders, TIES provides small enterprises and individuals with valuable networking and professional development opportunities. As a credible global source of knowledge, a leading organization that set out the principles the industry follows, and an advocate of ecotourism, TIES offers practical educational tools and promotes capacity building opportunities for professionals. Utilizing the global ecotourism development experiences, the organization helps mainstream sustainability in tourism and inspires positive changes in the industry.

The Center for Responsible Travel (CREST)

CREST is a policy-oriented research organization committed to increasing the positive global impact of conscientious tourism. CREST assists policy makers, governments, tourism businesses, international agencies and nonprofit organizations as they strive to come up with solutions to important issues confronting tourism, the world's most substantial service industry. CREST provides innovative solutions through research, publications, field projects, conferences, courses, consultancies, and documentary films, in full recognition of tourism's potential as a tool for alleviating poverty and creating biodiversity conservation.

World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO)

The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) is the United Nations body responsible for making the tourism sector conscientious, sustainable, and accessible by everyone. As the leading international organization in the field of tourism, UNWTO perceives tourism as a stimulator of economic growth, environmental sustainability, and inclusive progress and offers guidance and assistance to the sector in advancing knowledge and tourism policies worldwide. UNWTO invites member states to implement the Global Code of Ethics for Tourism, with the aim to extend tourism's socio-economic benefits to their maximum and diminish tourism's possible negative impacts. The organization is also committed to promoting tourism as a tool for meeting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which were adopted to reduce poverty and attain sustainable development worldwide.

TIMELINE OF EVENTS

DATE	DESCRIPTION OF EVENT
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<p>1 June 1980</p>	<p>Costa Rica was a scientific research and experimentation center for USA and Canada. Funds for the research were provided by the tourists visiting the country. With time, this developed into a specific type of tourism. Also, Europe was presenting Green Tourism in these years.</p>
<p>10 September 1987</p>	<p>"Our Common Future" aka "Brundtland Report" from the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development was published.</p>
<p>3 February 1990</p>	<p>The International Ecotourism Organization (TIES) was founded.</p>
<p>15 November 1990</p>	<p>"Ecotourism" was defined by The International Ecotourism Organization.</p>
<p>3-14 June 1992</p>	<p>Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro (Brazil) —first direct actions to create sustainable forms of tourism.</p>
<p>8 March 1997</p>	<p>International Conference on Biodiversity and Tourism in Berlin —signing of the Berlin Declaration.</p>
<p>22 May 2002</p>	<p>The World Ecotourism Summit was held in Quebec City, Canada to mark 2002 as the International Year of Ecotourism. The Summit was an initiative of the World Tourism Organization (WTO) and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). Quebec Declaration on Ecotourism was published.</p>

15 August 2007

TIES released the Oslo Statement on Ecotourism, which was an outcome of the Global Ecotourism Conference 2007, held in Oslo, Norway.

21 December 2012	A resolution recognizing ecotourism as a key factor in the fight against poverty, in the protection of the environment and the promotion of sustainable development was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly.
20 December 2018	The UN General Assembly adopted a resolution entitled "Promotion of sustainable tourism, including ecotourism, for poverty eradication and environment protection"

RELEVANT UN RESOLUTIONS, TREATIES AND EVENTS

United Nations General Assembly Resolution

Adopted unanimously on 21/12/2012, the resolution under the title "Promotion of ecotourism for poverty eradication and environment protection" stressed ecotourism's role in the fight against poverty and the protection of the environment recognizing it as a tool for promoting sustainable development.

United Nations General Assembly Resolution

Adopted on 20/12/2018, the resolution entitled "Promotion of sustainable tourism, including ecotourism, for poverty eradication and environment protection" (A/ RES/73/245) and based on the report prepared by UNWTO recognizes that sustainable tourism, with ecotourism, is a converging activity that can contribute to the three dimensions of sustainable development and the achievement of the SDGs.

PREVIOUS ATTEMPTS TO SOLVE THE ISSUE

For this agenda item, previous attempts would be examples of government and nongovernmental organization support to promoting ecotourism.

In the UN-declared International Year of Ecotourism (IYE) 2002, UNWTO led a wide range of projects, including the organization of regional conferences and the World Ecotourism Summit, publishing guidelines for further ecotourism development and market reports to expand the public knowledge of seven prominent locations around the world that were considered “Ecotourism generating markets,” and supporting regional and national activities.

Several African governments, including Benin, South Africa, Kenya, Ethiopia, Malawi, Côte d’Ivoire, Namibia, Tanzania, Madagascar, and Cameroon, provide infrastructural, regulatory, and financial support to their local ecotourism organizations and consider ecotourism as a way to achieve sustainable development. For example, in 2015, the government of Madagascar drastically increased funding to promote the island as a preferred destination for ecotourists and set a target to attract up to two million annual visitors by 2020.

The Ecotourism Norway project was conducted by Green in Practice (GRIP) in cooperation with Innovation Norway, the Norwegian directorates for Cultural Heritage and Nature Management and a control group consisting of tourism companies and a destination. The Norwegian government has financed the project to promote the country as an ecotourism hotspot. As a result, a certification scheme for Norwegian ecotourism was officially published in January 2008. The certification scheme was developed in accordance with the Norwegian ecosystem and cultural heritage, but was fully in line with the principles set out by the International Ecotourism Society (TIES).

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

Although their advocacy and efforts are substantial in the creation of an eco-friendly tourism industry, global organizations alone prove to be

relatively ineffective. However, they set guidelines for businesses to abide by; in any case, these guidelines should be backed up by government regulations and projects.

Governments are the most competent bodies to shape the future of tourism dictating how it is to be promoted, planned, managed and regulated. With environmental consciousness in mind, governments can have real long-term impact on the industry directing it towards more sustainable options, like ecotourism. While doing this, they can ensure the legislative protection of nature reserves and diminish the trace regular tourism leaves on the environment. In order to encourage businesses to convert

to eco-friendly practices, the governments need to incorporate these criteria into laws, regulations and incentives regarding the usage of protected areas and the extent of the involvement of local communities in ecotourism operations. These laws and incentives should be formulated in such a way that sustainable practices do not reduce the profit businesses make and become discouraging.

For a business to thrive, it needs to make sufficient profit. This eagerness to earn more is what causes small-scale ecotourism operations to grow into large-scale demand-driven tourism ventures. However, this is not an inevitable outcome. If the governments are able to lower the cost of operations for ecotourism businesses, the owners of the latter will be more inclined to comply with the principles of ecotourism. For example, if the government offers a tax rebate to ecotourism businesses that are able to remain within a certain scale of freshwater consumption per month, it would drive more businesses to lower their freshwater consumption by taking on fewer tourists at a time. This would result in both a lower-impact business and a reduction in overuse of water resources, which is one of the adverse impacts of mass tourism.

The government also plays an imperative role in facilitating these sustainable practices by funding infrastructure development, providing training for guides and generally making it more convenient for ecotourism operators to carry out their environmentally sustainable business. Unfortunately, most governments, especially those of developing countries, face financial barriers while supporting sustainable practices. Additionally, many of these developing countries have political instability, which often hinders the development of a long-term vision and planning for tourism and ecotourism. Hence, government regulations alone are not sufficient either. A joint effort by both the governments and the nongovernmental organizations is necessary.

In order to overcome the financial obstacles, governments can seek assistance from regional development banks, like the African Development Bank, while offering microcredit options can be encouraged to support small ecotourism enterprises. Moreover, different mediums should be utilized to publicize local ecotourism opportunities and international ties should be strengthened to make ecotourism heard of all around the world,

as a favorable way of travelling.

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