



## Contextualising the meaning of ecotourism



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### ABSTRACT

Ecotourism is one of the most advocated concepts in tourism studies, yet there remains considerable debate on what the meaning is, or what it should be. Despite this lack of clarity, there is a broad set of ecotourism principles that are clear and widely promoted, including environmental conservation and education, cultural preservation and experience, and economic benefits. Based on these principles, this paper compares local understanding of ecotourism from the perspectives of ecotourism-related agency staff, and local communities adjacent to the Kakum Conservation Area, Ghana. Using a qualitative research approach, agency staff and community residents were involved in interview conversations. Findings indicate a limited agency understanding of ecotourism, and local community confusion between conservation and ecotourism.

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### 1. Introduction

The concept of ecotourism has been perhaps the most dramatic outcome of the environmental movements and insurgency that showcased the sustainability limitations of mass tourism. From a humble beginning in the 1980s in which ecotourism was perceived largely as visitation to natural areas for the purposes of enjoyment and education (Ceballos-Lascurain, 1987), the meaning of the concept had by the turn of the 21st century broadened to incorporate environmental conservation, economic development, social inclusion, cultural preservation, human rights and ethical issues (e.g., Donohoe and Needham, 2006; Fennell, 2008). Yet, after an initial period when ecotourism was welcomed as a positive alternative to mass tourism, there is today some ambivalence as to its true meaning or purpose. There are those (e.g., Courvisanos and Jain, 2006; Drumm and Moore, 2002; Wheeler, 1993) who argue that ecotourism is just a marketing tactic, and that the purpose of ecotourism is not understood by many, resulting in the abuse and misuse of the concept to attract conservation conscious tourists to nature based tourism programmes under the banner of ecotourism, which often times generate negative environmental and social impacts. Others (e.g., Courvisanos and Jain, 2006; Donohoe and Needham, 2006), owing to the inconsistency in the meaning of ecotourism, have expressed concern about the widening gap between ecotourism theory and practise, which, to some extent, has rendered the concept impracticable.

Amidst these uncertainties, there is a set of value-based principles which are often associated with the concept of ecotourism, and widely applied in ecotourism research and practise, including conservation/preservation, ethics, sustainability, education, economic benefits, and

participation (e.g., Donohoe and Needham, 2006; Fennell, 2008; Ross and Wall, 1999). However, when it comes to successful operation of an ecotourism activity, the pervading impression is of the failure of governments, conservation agencies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and local communities to make any appreciable impact on effectuating the basic principles of ecotourism, a fact which has in turn provoked serious and ongoing debates as to the appropriate framework for actualising the principles of ecotourism (Cobbinah et al., 2015a; Courvisanos and Jain, 2006; Ross and Wall, 1999). Unfortunately, what is often overlooked is local understanding of the ecotourism concept. For many developing countries where ecotourism resources abound, the term ecotourism is largely foreign often introduced and imposed on local communities by international agencies, NGOs and governments. Although their perspectives on the meaning of ecotourism are often ignored, these communities tend to be at the receiving end of the outcomes – both positive and negative – of ecotourism activities.

It is thus appropriate at this time to undertake an assessment of how well contemporary research on ecotourism has influenced local understanding of the concept, which is necessary to understand how ecotourism is practised at the local community. Based on the common principles of ecotourism reported in the literature, this paper compares local understanding of the concept of ecotourism from the perspectives of agency staff and local communities adjacent to the Kakum Conservation Area (KCA), Ghana.

#### 1.1. Historical antecedents and definitions of ecotourism

Literature describing the history of ecotourism shows that the concept has been in existence since the 18th century, but by a different name (e.g., Beaumont, 1998; Hetzer, 1965). Beaumont (1998) classifies the early geographers who toured the world during the period as

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ecotourists, and indicates that the establishment of national parks, including Yellowstone in the United States of America in 1872 and Banff in Canada in 1885, was evidence of early interest in ecotourism. Whilst some scholars (e.g., Honey, 1999) argue that the term 'ecotourism' was coined by Ceballos-Lascurain, other writers (e.g., Blamey, 2001; Hetzer, 1965) claim that the concept was first used by Hetzer in his book 'Environment, tourism, and culture' to explain the type of relationships that exist between the environment, tourists and local cultures, and to establish the level of interaction thereof. Despite the different opinions on its origin, the emergence of ecotourism was strongly linked with the environment, and was strongly advocated by environmental movements in the 1970s and 1980s (Honey, 1999).

The concept of ecotourism became popular, especially in the 1970s and 1980s, as a result of the negative social and environmental impacts associated with mass tourism, which places greater emphasis on income and growth, rather than environmental conservation and the socio-cultural goals of host communities (Ziffer, 1989). Increasing concerns about the impact of mass tourism on both the natural environment and local communities and cultures, coupled with the emergence of the sustainable development concept (see WCED, 1987), led to the rise in popularity of sustainable forms of tourism, including ecotourism. One of the early and formal definitions of ecotourism was given by Ceballos-Lascurain in the 1980s as:

“... Travelling to relatively undisturbed or uncontaminated natural areas with the specific objective of studying, admiring, and enjoying the scenery and its wild plants and animals, as well as any existing cultural manifestations (both past and present) found in these areas” (Ceballos-Lascurain, 1987, p. 14).

Over the past three decades, the discussion on ecotourism has gained dominance in both environmental and social conferences and journals worldwide, with the definitional interpretations being broadened to incorporate ethical issues or normative components. For example, Ziffer (1989) describes ecotourism as a form of tourism, stimulated primarily by the natural history and indigenous cultures of an area, and one that inspires in visitors the spirit of appreciation, participation and sensitivity. Ziffer (1989) further indicates that ecotourism promotes non-consumptive use of wildlife and natural resources, and contributes to conservation and the socio-economic wellbeing of local residents. The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) provided a simpler definition of ecotourism in 1990 as responsible travel to natural areas, which seeks to conserve the environment and sustain the wellbeing of the local communities (TIES, 2013). This definition by TIES is supported by the World Conservation Union's (IUCN) explanation of ecotourism, adopted from Ceballos-Lascurain (1996), which describes ecotourism as environmentally responsible travel and visitation to natural areas, with the purpose of enjoying and appreciating nature and other cultural features, as well as promoting conservation, minimising visitor impact and providing for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local people (Ceballos-Lascurain, 1996). Thus, the concept of ecotourism seeks to conserve the environment, protect local cultures and deliver benefits to both tourists and the host communities. In 1999, Honey expanded on the TIES (1990) definition, and introduced another definitional dimension (equity) into the ecotourism discourse. Honey (1999) defines the concept of ecotourism as small scale travelling to fragile, pristine and protected areas with the fundamental objective of educating travellers, providing funds for conservation, yielding direct benefits for the economic development and political empowerment of the local communities, as well as fostering respects for different cultures and human rights. In explaining this definition, Honey (1999) emphasises low impacts on host communities and the environment, as well as empowerment of the local communities through equitable distribution of tourism benefits.

The definition of ecotourism continues to evolve, and remains a hotly debated concept in the social and ecological literature

(e.g., Fennell, 2001, 2003). For example, Fennell (2001), after analysing available ecotourism definitions, identified five common variables used to describe ecotourism — the natural environment, education, protection or conservation of resources, preservation of culture and community benefits. Fennell (2003) further perceives ecotourism as a sustainable form of natural resource-based tourism, that is fundamentally geared towards experiencing and gaining deeper insight about nature, and which is ethically managed to be low-impact, non consumptive and locally oriented, in terms of control of resources and benefits to the people. In addition, other researchers (e.g., Blamey, 2001) have linked the ethical components of ecotourism to educational experiences and the conservation of natural environment and cultural resources, which both remain critical to ecotourism research.

Nonetheless, Drumm and Moore (2002) argue that some people have lost focus of the ethical or normative component of ecotourism, and have abused and misused the term to attract conservation conscious travellers to what, in reality, are simply nature tourism programmes, which have the potential of creating negative environmental and social impacts. Wheeler (1993) also argues that ecotourism should be considered as a form of 'ego-tourism' because inherently, it cannot be regarded as a solution to the problems of mass tourism, but has indeed added to the problem as it introduces new destinations to the tourism market. According to this view, advocates of ecotourism are more concerned with maintaining the status quo, in relation to tourism operations, by massaging their own egos and appeasing their guilt rather than addressing the actual issues involved in ecotourism implementation. The recognition of abuse of the concept of ecotourism appears to have informed Hillel's (2002) interpretation of it. According to Hillel (2002), ecotourism should integrate the three objectives/pillars of sustainable development, and involve a positive contribution to the conservation of sensitive ecosystems and protected areas through financial and political support, as well as ensuring active participation from, and economic benefits to local communities and indigenous people, coupled with environmental education of the host communities, professionals and guests. Hillel (2002) believes that this interpretation addresses issues of abuse, equity and sustainability of ecotourism. Fig. 1 summarises the evolution of the meaning of ecotourism, before 1990 to the 2000s.

The literature also suggests that while sustainable development remains central to the ecotourism discussion in developed countries, poverty reduction is key in developing countries. For example, in developed countries, previous research (e.g., Boo, 1990) have interpreted ecotourism as a sustainable concept, which seeks to achieve environmental conservation while delivering tourist satisfaction and minimising negative impacts. Boo (1990) argues that, in order to promote sustainable development principles of ecotourism, the concept should be tagged 'sustainable ecotourism', to appeal to the conscience of ecotourism stakeholders and to communicate the need to integrate other dimensions of sustainable development into ecotourism activities, rather than dwelling solely on the economic benefits. Recent research by Donohoe and Needham (2006) also reveals that 'sustainability' remains central to the definition of ecotourism in the developed countries such as Canada.

Although sustainable development has been key to the ecotourism discourse in developing countries, research (e.g., Gurung and Seeland, 2008, Tuohino and Hynonen, 2001) has shown that the interpretations of ecotourism have also been strongly linked to poverty reduction and local development. This is because ecotourism in developing countries largely occurs in protected areas (e.g., Asiedu, 2002; Cobbinah et al., 2015a; Stone and Wall, 2004), and results in changes in the use of protected area resources by, and livelihoods of local people (Cobbinah, Black and Thwaites, 2015b). For instance, the Ecotourism Society Pakistan (ESP) explains ecotourism as a travelling activity that generates direct financial benefits to local people, educates travellers to respect local cultures, and supports small stakeholders to ensure local development, while discouraging mass tourism, mass constructions

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