



Reviews in tourism

Ecotourism: A panacea or a predicament?



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ABSTRACT

The paper aims to provide a description of the vision and present practices of ecotourism. Promotion of local livelihoods through ecotourism has been widely considered as an important policy instrument for biodiversity conservation. But ecotourism has become a hotly debated topic since its implementation across countries because of the mismatch in vision and practice. The paper uses content analysis method for reviewing published literature. Published peer-reviewed journal articles on ecotourism during 2000–2013 were collected and reviewed. The overall evidence on the outcomes of ecotourism in the world shows mixed results. Though there are many success stories, the list of failures is very high. Owing to the structural, operational and cultural problems, ecotourism in many places has become a predicament. Thus, ecotourism should be introduced with proper monitoring, evaluation and management of ecotourism sites for reinforcing long term conservation.

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1. Introduction

The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) 1991 defines ecotourism as “responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the welfare of the local people.” The principles of ecotourism are to: a) minimize negative environmental impact, b) build environmental as well as cultural awareness and respect, c) provide positive experiences for both visitors and hosts, d) provide direct financial benefits for conservation, e) provide financial benefits and empowerment for local people, and f) raise sensitivity to host countries' political, environmental, and social climate.² Quebec declaration on ecotourism (2002) recognizes the principles of sustainable tourism, concerning the economic, social and environmental impacts of tourism. The declaration says that ecotourism:

- contributes actively to the conservation of natural and cultural heritage,
- includes local and indigenous communities in its planning, development and operation, and contributing to their well-being,
- interprets the natural and cultural heritage of the destination to visitors, and
- lends itself better to independent travelers as well as to organized tours for small size groups.³

Ecotourism is a strategy for supporting conservation and providing income for communities in and around protected areas. It can contribute to economic development and conservation of protected areas by: a) generating revenues that can be used to sustainably manage protected areas, b) providing local employment, and c) inculcating a sense of community ownership (Jalani, 2012). Wildlife areas and national parks constitute a significant market for ecotourism based on natural resources and local culture (Surendran & Sekhar, 2011). Conservationists have promoted ecotourism as an integral tool of conservation of natural resources and development of indigenous communities (Stronza, 2007). It supports livelihood diversification, which is particularly important in remote areas, is labor intensive, can grow with unspecialized labor, and has low entry barriers (Holland, Burian, & Dixey, 2003). Promotion of local livelihoods through ecotourism has been widely considered as an important policy instrument for biodiversity conservation (Cattarinich, 2001; Lai & Nepal, 2006; Scheyvens, 2007).

In many parts of the world, ecotourism has contributed to the dual goal of poverty eradication and conservation of natural resources (Surendran & Sekhar, 2011). Promotion of ecotourism creates a large amount of employment opportunities for local people who remain engaged in a variety of activities related to tourism. The resolution, entitled, “Promotion of ecotourism for poverty eradication and environment protection”, calls on UN member states to adopt policies that promote ecotourism highlighting its “positive impact on income generation, job creation and education, and thus on the fight against poverty and hunger”. It further recognizes that “ecotourism creates significant opportunities for the conservation, protection and sustainable use of biodiversity and of natural areas by encouraging local and indigenous communities in host countries and tourists alike to preserve and respect the natural and cultural heritage”.⁴

However, against the backdrop of increasing popularity of ecotourism, Banerjee (2010) discovers that the present policies of ecotourism benefit neither conservation nor local communities. The concept remains poorly understood and much abused. Lack of funding, mismanagement, population and development pressures as well as poaching and bureaucratic nature of forest department have distorted the very

concept of ecotourism. Environmental degradation, wildlife habitat destruction, economic inequity, instability, and negative socio-economic and cultural changes within local communities are some of the few problems associated with the introduction of ecotourism (Gulinck, Vyverman, Bouchout, & Gobin, 2001). Tourism in a sensitive and fragile ecosystem may not come without incurring costs (Banerjee, 2010; Kumar, 2002; Sekhar, 2003). As such the idea of ecotourism is highly contentious and a hotly debated topic ever since it has been implemented across different countries.

Numbers of researchers have expressed their serious concern that in practice much of ecotourism simply neglects communities and local people. It is simply used as a ‘buzzword’ to fascinate customers. This leads to serious policy failures. It has been often reflected that the costs incurred for the creation of ecotourism spots tend to be felt most severely at local levels, especially in the short term. Therefore, the net benefits from such conservation are low and occasionally negative for the members of local communities. In the name of conservation the already marginalized communities are further marginalized. By uprooting these communities from their traditional homeland and their native socio-cultural environment, and by destroying their economy, they are exposed to outside exploitation. It has also been observed that the average rate of species extinction has actually increased dramatically over the past few decades. One of the important reasons for this is that the protected areas are imposed on a community with no or less input, and no regard for the local people. This is the root cause behind the formation of all conflict.⁵

A large number of scholars also advocate that, in practice, ecotourism has often failed to deliver the expected benefits to indigenous communities due to a combination of factors like lack of mechanisms for a fair distribution of the economic benefits of ecotourism, land insecurity, little control of the villagers over tourism and more influx of tourists (Coria & Calfucura, 2012; Counsell, 2005). Social advocates argue that protected areas take away local rights of access to critical resources and, thus, negatively and unreasonably impact the social and economic welfare of neighboring communities. This negative human impact harms protected area's conservation objectives because protected areas cannot succeed without the support of local communities. In the process poverty, which is aggravated by protected areas, becomes a root cause of ecosystem degradation. The 2004 World Parks Congress issued a declaration that “many costs of protected areas are borne locally—particularly by poor communities” (Springer, 2009, pp. 26).

The overall evidence on the outcomes of ecotourism in the world show mixed results. The proponents see in ecotourism the potential of betterment of the indigenous communities through income generating opportunities, local empowerment, and increased number of species as a result of conservational policies. Critics, however, say that ecotourism perpetuates economic inequality and disempowers local people (Horton, 2009). Lack of access to land and natural resources, and alienating locals from planning process further aggravate the situation. It is seen in many cases that there has been an increase in people-policy-wildlife conflict for which the very purpose of ecotourism fails.

The purpose of the present study is to advance knowledge of the complex approach of ecotourism. A series of literature have been consulted to discover the praxis and theory. The efficacy of ecotourism in conservation through the promotion of livelihood system of local people in and around the protected areas in different parts of the world is reviewed. On the basis of the review, the study finally concludes whether it is a panacea or a predicament to natural species as well as indigenous communities.

2. Review methodology

Content analysis method is adopted for literature review. Content analysis is an observational research method that is used to systematically evaluate the content of all forms of recorded communication

² Retrieved from <http://www.ecotourism.org> on 8th August, 2012.

³ Retrieved from <http://www.unep.fr/scp/publications/details.asp?id=WEB/0078/PA> on 6th September, 2012.

⁴ Retrieved from unwto.org/en/press-release/2013-01-03/un-general-assembly-ecotourism-key-eradicating-poverty-and-protecting-envir on 7th October, 2014.

⁵ Retrieved from <http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/tsdw20> on 25th May, 2013.

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