Ecotourism’s Identity Crisis: How Green is My Vacation?

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ABSTRACT
Ecotourism is a term broadly applied to a range of tourist activities, based on type of activity. It conveys positive connotations and implies careful considerations of tourist impact. If ecotourism is to be a positive force, considerations of impact will define it. The issue becomes whether ecotourism can be planned by a structure of actions or whether case-by-case, anticipation and evaluation of impact is necessary. Individual evaluation seems the only functional approach. Issues that are critical to the creation of ecotourism are realistic expectations, restraint, and an understanding of what constitutes success.

JUST WHAT IS ECOTOURISM?: WHAT WE DON’T KNOW CAN HURT

Ecotourism is a word that has not been defined. It is, however, used with increasing frequency, and clearly with the intent of conveying some sort of message. Before a definition can be attempted, it is necessary to understand how ecotourism is being used, what it seems to mean, what it implies. Ultimately, it will be necessary to decide if ecotourism can be defined by activity (e.g. going to a rain forest to see parrots) or by impact (e.g. parrot nesting is disturbed). When impact determines activity, each situation becomes individual. What is good in one place could be damaging elsewhere, and this needs to be determined in each case.

At present, the greatest danger inherent in ecotourism may be that, undefined, it is easily used as a label in response to it having a positive connotation. This surely has contributed to the negative reaction of those biologists and conservationists who disparage ecotourism. Using buzzwords to imply environmental soundness is not new. Paper manufacturers have long used waste materials such as sawdust in the manufacture of certain papers. When public demand and political correctness made this a marketable fact, products manufactured this way were labeled “recycled.” The term was not incorrect. Use was being made of waste products. At the same time, the issue of recycling used paper was in no way being addressed. The public, unaware of the specifics of just what was being recycled, often assumed it was. Criticism led to the creation of the more specific term post-consumer waste materials. Recyclable and organic are two other terms that have been easily used as marketing tools, often in ambiguous ways.
At best, current usage of the term “ecotourism” is ambiguous, and some applications are deceptive. This has led to deception of consumers, failure to address real issues, and mistrust and cynicism among scientists and the lay public. Until there is clarification of the term and its usage, the criticism is valid.

If the prefix eco attached to tourism simply connotes travel that includes the observation and appreciation of nature (defined by the act) as it often is used, then it really is nothing new. Travelers have long been visiting places such as East Africa and the Galapagos Islands to view wildlife. Whale watching has been a growing industry for decades. Scuba divers, in ever greater numbers, have been spending big bucks to dive to see pristine and remote coral reefs. Even the people who gather for the return of swallows to San Juan Capistrano in California are, by this simple definition, ecotourists.

A definition that includes any visits to a natural area or observations of nature would include all visitation to parks, all scuba divers, casual snorkelers, hikers, walkers, and boaters, among others. This definition applies to components of traditional tourism, such as the tropical resort vacationer who goes snorkeling or takes an organized half-day rain forest walk. This greatly expands the scope of what must be considered and worsens ecotourism’s identity crisis. If ecotourism is going to have any identity then we must begin by eliminating its blanket use as a term to describe these other activities. It should be kept in mind that, while ecotourism is inappropriate as a general description of this broad range, when defined by impact, any of these activities could qualify.

Thus, impact becomes the preeminent issue. It is clear that ecotourism is used to connote something positive—at a minimum, sensitivity to the environment. The end result of acts, rather than the nature of the acts themselves, are what counts. The acts, therefore, must be structured around the needs of the end.

TOURISM’S REACH AND EFFECTS:
CAN IT HAPPEN HERE?

My observations of traveling and travelers—from my position as a photojournalist, conservation program administrator, and inveterate traveler—have led to questions I feel need to be asked in order to evaluate the “goodness” or “badness” of ecotourism and to plan ecotourism ventures.

First, it must be realized that outsiders have an impact. The more remote the place (insular, less in contact with the outside world), the more profound the effect. The simple presence of people adds to the use of local resources; outsiders influence economic and social
dynamics. This is not inherently negative, but these issues must be considered to avoid damage. Ecotourism, if it is to be a positive force, therefore requires forethought and restraint. This may mean restraints on the numbers and types of visitors, limitations on services made available to visitors, limitations on visitors’ activities, or even restraint on access to some places.

Another crucial consideration is the speed at which impact can occur. Here history is a valid teacher in showing that the past cannot be used as a model for the future. Tour operators interested in bringing tourists to “new” far-flung places face many logistical difficulties. Modern technology and greater demand have expedited the “opening up” of “new” places. Today, political and legal obstacles are usually more significant than logistical ones. When I first visited Ambergris Cay, an island off Belize, in 1977, the only developed part of the island was the fishing village of San Pedro. It had just a few, locally run hotels and one “tourist” hotel, which consisted of several thatched huts. This latter catered largely to boaters from Texas and a few off-the-beaten-path travelers who wanted a level of comfort above the local establishments. Some of the visitors were intrepid scuba divers looking for new places to explore. San Pedro, then, was a low-key place, home to local fishermen and a tiny tourist industry.

For the most part, San Pedro existed in harmony with its tropical barrier reef island environment. While several facets of life there were not ideal from an environmentalist point of view they were understandable, and possibly acceptable, because of their small scale. Looking at wildlife: black coral was harvested and sold; turtles and manatees were hunted for food. These all are species that most conservationists seek to protect. In 1977, San Pedro fishermen argued that they caught just one or two manatees a year, and that turtles, long a part of their diet, were only hunted for local consumption. As for black coral, only one person was licensed to harvest, carve, and sell it, all of which he did himself, and they believed this was a sustainable use of a resource. At the time I felt that if these were, in fact, sustainable harvests, and if the current balance was maintained, these could be acceptable arguments. Considering just how off-the-beaten-path Belize was in the late 1970s (I had difficulty getting a flight there as reservation agents in New York had never heard of Belize and kept trying to send me to Brazil) this seemed possible.

In the 1980s, Belize became widely recognized for its spectacular coral reefs and grew to be one of the Caribbean’s top diving destinations. Ambergris Cay is one of the places that has grown most dramatically. San Pedro is now a popular resort with numerous hotels.
that cater heavily to upper-income travelers. Along with this growth has come expanded demand on resources. For example, there are now many more customers for black coral products, which has resulted in much greater, and unacceptable, levels of exploitation of this resource.

This is not to say that tourism has had a negative impact overall. In order to make that determination, a careful analysis of all changes and impacts would be necessary. On the heels of the dive travel boom came the public’s interest in rain forests, and Belize fit the profile of a “developable destination”—reasonably healthy forests, low industrial development, and good potential accessibility. The country went from being a remote destination for intrepid fisherman and divers to becoming one of the world’s prime “eco” destinations. Tourists and the money they bring have given immediate, tangible value to the preservation of forests. This demonstrates an alternative to lumber board-feet as the economic basis for assessing a forest’s value—a poignant contrast to earlier in this century, when Belizean mahogany was virtually extirpated from over-harvesting.

The above in no way quantifies or passes ultimate judgment on the impact of two decades of exponential growth, understood, for the most part, to be ecotourism. The example illustrates the critical need for micro as well as macro analysis: an assessment of overall impact along with a weighing of specific negatives against positives. This latter calculation leads to the question of what effects are unacceptable no matter what benefits are achieved. For example, in the above case, could a system that accelerates the depletion of a fragile species such as black coral ever be deemed ecologically positive?

Clearly, places that seem to be remote and immune to tourism development, even if they have not materially changed over long periods, can be “discovered” and quickly altered. Furthermore, small numbers of outside visitors can become the tip of the wedge that can lead to sudden, unplanned changes and impacts. Increasing demand and advancing technology make it ever more possible to rapidly “open up” new destinations. The risk grows that such haste may not allow for thorough investigation of all factors, especially those which cause delays, create restrictions, or increase costs.

**WATCH WORDS—CAN THE MONSTER BE TAMED?**

Determining the impact or range of impacts will be the basis for making ecotourism a meaningful word. Assuming ecotourism means activities that are at least benign and possibly beneficial to those visited (i.e., indigenous peoples and their cultures, ecosystems, wildlife), and possibly enlightening for visitors, then the issues that
could make ecotourism possible must be identified. Three such critical issues are expectation, restraint, and success.

EXPECTATION

Expectation is a serious issue in the development of ecotourism. For those who have been to ecotourist sites such as East Africa and the Galapagos Islands, a visit to a rain forest could be a great disappointment. East Africa and the Galapagos Islands offer easy opportunities to see wildlife at close range. A rain forest is a very different experience. Its animals are less readily viewable. Rain forest promotional brochures often will show some of the attractive species found there, such as toucans and macaws. It is possible to see them, sometimes in spectacular numbers. But it is also likely that just a few individuals will be spotted. Visitors must be prepared for the experience—and visiting a rain forest is a great experience—so that expectations are realistic. It is incumbent upon tour operators to accurately portray the nature of a trip. This provides an opportunity to sensitize visitors and make the experience more rewarding. The consequences of disappointment, beyond dissatisfied clients, are bolder attempts to satisfy visitors with less regard to impact.

This situation, in fact, can be clearly illustrated by a situation that has taken place in the United States. Whale watching has grown to become such a large activity that there are entire books listing places it occurs in the U.S. At Cape Cod, Massachusetts, and Baja, Mexico, it has become a mainstay of local tourist industries. In such areas, questions have arisen as to the impact of growing numbers of boats spending ever greater cumulative amounts of time among whales, often in their calving grounds. Further, the pressure to produce a successful trip, which usually means several close encounters with whales, can motivate operators to do things that are potentially damaging.

Years ago I observed a growing, and ultimately financially successful, whale watching operation. The boat’s naturalist/scientist always dutifully lectured visitors on the protocols of whale watching, admonishing that he would not pursue whales to get close, but that we would move into likely areas and hope they came near us. Whenever spotters sited a blow spout, however, I repeatedly heard the same naturalist/scientist order the captain to move towards it at full speed. The boat was maneuvered to get closer or to be where a sited whale would surface to breathe. At times I saw whales react by suddenly, sharply changing direction to get away from the boat. These were clear violations of the Marine Mammal Protection Act’s prohibition on the harassment of whales. Among other things, harassment is defined as causing changes in behavior or swimming...
direction. This illustrates that legislation alone cannot ensure ethical behavior. It also shows the need to scrutinize what seems to be ecotourism.

One reason for the actions of this boat’s naturalist/scientist was to keep up with the expectations of passengers who had been, or heard about, whale watching at places where the whales usually are seen in spectacular displays. The species we were observing rarely breached like Cape Cod’s humpbacks or surfaced next to boats like Baja’s gray whales.

RESTRAINT

This leads to the matter of restraint. Restraint could refer to refraining from activities that might create a more exciting experience (e.g., pursuing whales) or limiting visitor numbers, which only can be evaluated when placed in context. One hundred additional visitors to a remote place could impact more greatly than, say, 10,000 more people arriving in Miami. Sewage generated in places without the infrastructure to handle it has had a particularly detrimental effect. Restraint also refers to the introduction of incongruous services or facilities for visitors that cause damaging effects to local cultures or ecosystems.

In ecotourism, restraint is an integral element of success. For ecotourism to succeed, it needs to be sustainable. It cannot be sustained if it destroys that which brought it into existence (e.g., damage to a coral reef by overdiving). So, by definition, ecotourism is an endeavor that seeks to find a sustainable level of exploitation (defined as “making use of” rather than “abusing”). It must sustain what it needs to for itself while maintaining the integrity of the people and place being visited.

SUCCESS

Traditionally, success in an endeavor is associated with profit, while economic profit is an issue that has caused some controversy. Purists contend that a business will inevitably put profits before conservation. Others contend that only when an environment has economic value will there be incentive to preserve it. There needs to be a reconciliation between the purist and profits camps.

The purist concerns are fair warnings that certain priorities must be maintained. They underscore that restraint, limitations, and realistic expectations—which at times might seem contrary to the function of a profit making enterprise—are critical to success.

On the other hand, people need to make use of resources. The more remote or poorer the area, the greater the need to exploit that which is available in nature. What needs to happen is that ventures
exploit resources in ways and to degrees that maintain the tenets of ecotourism and at the same time create a marketable experience for the tourist. Profit is not contradictory to the goal; it simply must be kept in proportion.

In fact, profit may be one of the most desirable results. It can offer security and a better standard of living for indigenous peoples, as well as providing incentive for preservation. It is essential, though, that involvement and benefits stay at the community level. If that is achieved, sustainable profits could be a sustainable motive for preservation.

**NOT SEEING THE FOREST FOR THE TREES: THINGS AREN’T ALWAYS WHAT THEY SEEM**

Positive benefits and actions from tourism in one area do not rule out negative impacts in another. The Cayman Islands is a case of what can only be called hypocritical conservation and illustrates why some people fear that the profit motive is inherently irreconcilable with conservation.

The Cayman Islands is one of the top Caribbean diving and beach resort destinations. Its major attractions are miles of beautiful beaches and scrupulously protected coral reefs. The Islands’ strict reef protection regulations are prominently proclaimed both to warn visitors and to trumpet proudly the preservation of this most fragile of ecosystems. Corals and fishes are totally protected and may not be touched or taken.

This clearly is admirable and has been effective. It does not even matter if the motivation was financial (tourism industry) and not scientific or altruistic. However, at the same time that it staunchly protects its income-generating coral resources, the Cayman Islands aggressively promote the sale of black coral products—made from coral harvested elsewhere. Cayman Islands tourist literature boasts of the many coral artisans and the great availability of black coral products. All this black coral is harvested from reefs elsewhere, predominately those along the Caribbean coast of Central America, where reefs are being damaged and the species is being decimated. Black coral is very slow-growing. Pieces thick enough to be used for jewelry may be a century or more old and usually are found in very deep water. This is not a renewable resource. Shops in the Caymans not only sell great quantities of black coral jewelry, but one can also buy objects such as sculptures, flatware with coral handles, and candlesticks made from thick, ancient corals.

So here we have a situation where legislation clearly protects a fragile ecosystem and the protection is effectively enforced—a rare
and noble combination. Yet visitors are offered products that promote the decimation of ecosystems elsewhere in an atmosphere that implies the presence of a conservation ethic. Therefore, can a visit to the Cayman Islands constitute ecotourism?

Most importantly, this illustrates the difficulty of determining the ramifications of tourism and the importance of delving beyond the obvious. It also underscores the power of tourism-generated income as a motivation for conservation as well as the collateral negative impacts that can be enabled.

These examples by no means demonstrate all the types of questions that need to be asked of a tourism venture. What I do conclude is that if ecotourism is to be a term that indicates visitation that impacts benignly or beneficially upon an ecosystem or society, impact assessment will dictate the nature and limits of such ventures. This will require a great effort to identify the questions that need to be asked and careful “what if...” extrapolation (what if a demand for XXX is created? What if 35 outsiders per week are provided with hot showers?) Ecotourism can be a powerful force for conservation as well as linking preservationist concerns with the real economic issues of indigenous peoples. The structure of such ventures cannot be predefined but must be individually constructed in response to the specific needs and sensitivities of each situation, making ecotourism more complex to establish than traditional tourism.

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Robert Rattner is a freelance photographer/author best known for his documentary journalism, travel, nature, and underwater photography. He has journeyed to more than fifty countries documenting the people, places, and natural history of our planet. His work has appeared in major publications and periodicals such as Audubon, Conde Nast Traveler, Discover, International Wildlife, National Geographic, Natural History, Newsweek, The New Yorker, Smithsonian, Time, and Travel & Leisure. He has exhibited in Washington D.C., Maryland, Connecticut, New York City, and Long Island. In 1991, he became the first recipient of the Marty Forsher Grant, awarded for excellence in socially important photography. He sits on the Board of Directors of Wildlife Preservation Trust International, and since 1993 has served as the organization’s President. He has made several visits to Washington D.C. to brief members of Congress on conservation issues including the plight of America’s manatees.

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