

An overview of wildlife tourism



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It may be high volume mass tourism or low volume and low impact tourism. It may generate high economic returns or low economic returns, be sustainable or unsustainable, domestic or international, and based on day visits or longer stays (Roe et al., 1997). Wildlife tourism includes activities such as bird watching, whale watching, reef diving, gorilla tourism and photographic safari. Wildlife tourism can include interaction with animals in captivity but for the purposes of this paper the narrower definition of wildlife tourism as denoting only human contact with animals in the wild is used.

Wildlife tourism is a holiday with a difference. A wildlife tourism holiday offers a different experience for each traveller on each occasion, as the major component of the holiday, the wildlife, is unpredictable. Tourists often feel that they, and they alone, have experienced a particular aspect of an animals behaviour.

Wildlife tourism often involves not only seeing rare or exciting animals in their natural habitat, but visiting areas that are difficult to travel to and hence not visited by many tourists. This perceived exclusivity adds to the appeal of wildlife tourism.

In the a study reported in the Times, three of the top five Things to Do Before You Die involved an aspect of wildlife tourism (swim with dolphins, whale watching and swim with sharks respectively). For many participants a wildlife holiday will be remembered for many years to come as a holiday with a difference.

Trends in Consumer Behaviour that are Catered for by Wildlife Tourism

Public interest in conservation and environmental matters is growing. 85% of industrialised world citizens believe that the environment is the most important public issue (Carson and Moulden, 1991). This socio-cultural trend has led to an increase in the demand for ecotourism. Ecotourism is nature-based tourism that involves ecologically sustainable management of natural areas and an interaction with or observance of either flora or fauna. This is precisely what wildlife tourism provides.

There has also been a trend towards experiential tourism; that is active, rather than passive travel. People increasingly want to feel that they are participating in and influencing the area they travel to. Wildlife tourism caters for this trend in that tourists often feed or otherwise interact with the wildlife they visit.

The major world tourism markets, Europe and North America, are affected by an increase in the proportion of older people in the population. In addition, changes in working practises have meant that people have more flexibility to get longer periods of time off work. The days when gap years were restricted to students are gone. More mature people than before are taking sabbaticals from work or travelling after retirement. Wildlife tourism caters well for these grown up gappers as a longer time frame will allow remote geographical areas to be accessed and increase the chances of a successful wildlife encounter.

Management Issues Facing Wildlife Tourism

The management issues facing wildlife tourism are twofold, identifying methods of minimising the impact on the wildlife resource itself and ensuring

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that the tourists receive a valuable experience from the holiday. Sometimes these two aims are mutually exclusive.

There are many direct impacts of wildlife tourism on wildlife. They can be divided into categories such as habitat destruction, disturbance of feeding and disease transmission. Each of these categories will now be illustrated with an example.

Tourism can contribute to the destruction of wildlife habitat. In the Norfolk Broads, UK, large volumes of boat traffic, especially motor boats, result in considerable boat wash and river bank erosion and undermine on-going efforts to improve the Broads severely impaired water quality and threatened aquatic wildlife (Brouwer et al, 2001). The consequences of erosion can lead to important habitats being lost and the silt from the disappearing banks clogging up the waterways, which further deteriorates water quality.

In the Yacatan Peninsula, Mexico, 'boatloads of tourists were driven into groups of feeding flamingos to make them take flight' (Long, 1991, cited in Chin, Moore, Wallington & Dowling, 2000). This type of disturbance during feeding can have several effects depending on the magnitude of the disruption. Some birds may take flight temporarily, but return after the disturbance ends. Other birds may modify their feeding habits and desert the site of tourism disturbance permanently. When a bird is unexpectedly forced to take flight during feeding, energy intake terminates and energy expenditure significantly increases. Where disturbance causes a bird to desert a particular site, the availability of suitable alternative sites is critical

for the bird's survival. Furthermore, the site in which it settles may already be populated or may be of lower quality resulting in lower rates of energy intake.

The possible transmission of diseases from humans to animals is a serious threat resulting from the close contact between species that many wildlife tourism experiences involve. It is though that the mountain gorillas of Rwanda are particularly affected. Humans and gorillas share about 97% of their genetic makeup and they are therefore susceptible to many of the same diseases. These include tuberculosis, influenza, measles, polio and intestinal parasites (Cameron). The single population of 300 mountain gorillas in the Virunga Volcanoes is particularly badly affected. More than seventy tourists and a similar number of guides, porters, rangers and researchers visit seventy percent of the gorillas in this population daily. There have been several outbreaks of disease that can probably be attributed to humans. This includes an epidemic in 1988 in which six habituated gorillas died of respiratory illness and twenty-seven more became ill.

Methods of managing these and other negative effects on wildlife caused by wildlife tourism include restricting the number of tours allowed, education and finally licensing, and thereby controlling, the activities of tour groups.

The most popular example of restricting the number of tours allowed is that of the Galapagos Islands in Ecuador, which were protected in 1934. In the Galapagos Islands parts of the islands are designated as 'Intensive Visitor Zones', where a maximum of ninety people are allowed simultaneously on

shore. The 'Extensive Visitor Zones' are open to groups of less than twelve individuals (de Groot, 1983).

Education of operators and tourists about appropriate behaviour to adopt in the presence of wildlife is another method of managing the negative impacts of wildlife tourism on the animals involved. A code of conduct can be distributed to tour operators and publicly displayed in the local area. Tourist education can develop a demand-led requirement for responsible tour groups.

Licensing of tour companies is a method of minimising the impact of wildlife tourism. Licensing is often dependent on compliance with particular regulations, such as minimum approach distances. Many whale watching regulations specify a minimum approach distance of 100m (Brouwer et al, 2001).

The choice of type of management depends on the nature of the target species and the severity of the impacts on them. An analysis of the impacts of the specific wildlife tourism would be required before a management method was selected.

As well as managing the needs of the wildlife by minimising wildlife tourism's impact on them, tourism managers, of course, need to consider the needs of the tourists. Tourists want a wildlife watching experience that is both enjoyable and informative. The skills and knowledge of tour operators add to the experience of wildlife tourists and so should be maximised.

Wildlife tourism is inherently seasonal. Most species act differently according to the season. The best example of this is migration. The 'Great Migration' is the movement of over a million wildebeest between the Masai Mara and the Serengeti plains. There are numerous wildlife tourism opportunities presented by this, but there are of course dependent on the timing of the migration. The migration usually occurs May to June, but this can be affected by rainfall, which in turn affect availability of vegetation. Wildlife tourism management involves understanding the environmental influences on species behaviour and how this will affect tourism opportunities.

Wildlife tourists also want to get 'close up' to the wildlife (Orams, 2000). Managers of wildlife tourism need to attempt to ensure predictable occurrence of species within a relatively restricted area. Managers of wildlife tourism need to carefully integrate visitors and wildlife through management of their interactions whilst still ensuring damage to the species is limited.

Managers of wildlife tourism also need to ensure that there are other activities to keep tourists amused for times when wildlife does not co-operate with tour schedules. There needs to be an awareness of either other geographical locations that can be utilised to view the same wildlife or other species that can be more easily located.

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Conclusion

Wildlife tourism offers a holiday with a difference. It caters for emerging tourism trends, particularly ecotourism, experiential tourism and longer duration holidays. There are two main management issues facing wildlife

tourism. These are minimising the impact of tourism on the species involved and ensuring that wildlife tourists receive a quality experience. The particular management strategies that can be utilised depend upon the species involved and the severity of the impacts upon that species.

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