

# Alternative tourism and ecotourism

[Sport & Tourism](#), [Ecotourism](#)



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The critical climatic conditions and the disappearance of endangered species in the world's ecosystems is the concern of all, and affect our everyday lives, businesses and industries. The tourism industry is not spared, having adversely and greatly contributed to the destruction of micro-ecosystems and biodiversities over decades through Mass Tourism. Nonetheless, governments, tourism-planners and international organisations are now investing into alternative forms of tourism in order to counter the still ongoing damages of Mass Tourism. The goal is to consume differently and to sensitise tourists about sustainable practices, not only during their holidays, but to implement it in their very thinking and everyday life. This paper combines the material of four different papers, based on Alternative Tourism and Ecotourism respectively. They describe the principles of each and the features required for its successful fulfillment.

## **Introduction**

Lifestyles and consumer behaviour have been known to evolve and adapt to changes in global needs and the availability of resources in the world all

throughout history. As such, it is not surprising that the increase in awareness, concerning the precarious environmental, social and economic situation of today's world, is leading to new trends and behaviour in the way people live and consume. Likewise, the tourism industry has been undergoing a similar transformation since at least the past two decades with the advent of 'Alternative Tourism.'

This form of tourism has been introduced since the early nineties and has began to grow in magnitude as from the 1980s. It is considered as a sustainable alternative to counter the adverse effects and low-level authentic experiences provided by the so-called 'Mass Tourism.' The latter has boomed dramatically with the technological advance of transport facilities (air, sea and land) and the open-sky agreements between countries worldwide, amongst various other factors.

In spite of the huge, fast economic gains of Mass Tourism, it has been found to be severely disastrous on the environment and the socio-cultural aspects of host countries and communities, respectively. In contrast, Alternative Tourism has responded in retaliation into the 'clean' or 'sustainable' form of tourism, which takes into account, the impacts of tourism on nature, society (for both the host community and travelers), culture and economy. Here, locals are also directly involved in the making of the tourism product and are often the financial beneficiaries.

The umbrella of Alternative tourism covers a vast range of tourist activities such as rural, adventure, cultural and historical, heritage, sports (such as hiking, mountaineering, caving, diving, and so on), ecotourism and any other

forms of tourism that is not Mass Tourism, as long as it does not impact adversely on the host country.

Ecotourism has emerged since the 1960's and is popular amongst nature and culture lovers. It fits perfectly the concept of Alternative tourism and is considered as the fastest-growing form of sustainable tourism, according to the UNWTO (2003). Hetzer (1965) described the characteristics of ecotourism as: minimizing environmental impacts, respecting host cultures, maximizing benefits to local people and maximizing tourist satisfaction.

## **Literature Review**

Alternative Tourism is a process which promotes a just form of travel between members of different communities. It seeks to achieve mutual understanding, solidarity and equality amongst participants. (Holden, 1984, p. 15: cited in Smith & Eadington, 1992. P. 18)

McIntyre (1993, p. 11) defines Sustainable Tourism as a model form of economic development that is designed to improve the quality of life of the host community, and provide a high quality of experience for the visitor. Moreover, to maintain the quality of the environment on which both the host community and the visitor depend. He also states that it seeks decision-making among all segments of the society, including local populations, so that tourism and other resource users can coexist.

Firstly, Alternative Tourism does not damage the environment, is ecologically sound, and avoids the negative impacts of many large-scale tourism developments undertaken in areas which have not previously been

developed. Secondly, it is thought to consist of smaller scale developments, or attractions for tourists which are set in villages or communities and organised by them. These are seen as having fewer negative effects – social or cultural – and a better chance of being acceptable to the local people than mass tourism. Thirdly, there is the question of who benefits. Certain kinds of tourism are called alternative because they are not exploitative of the local people, because the benefits flow to local residents, or in general to poorer communities.

Also known as Soft Tourism, Sustainable tourism denotes a mutual understanding between the local population and their guests, which does not endanger the cultural identity of the host region and which endeavours to take care of the environment as best as possible. Soft tourists give priority to using infrastructures destined for the local population, use the same accommodation and transport facilities as the natives and do not accept substantial tourist facilities harmful to the environment (Smith & Eadington, 1992). Further, as they want to get more information before and during their holiday, it may actively try to encourage a respect for the cultural realities encountered by the tourists through education and organized “encounters” (de Kadt, 1990).

Alternative Tourism, also brings about constraints. For a variety of reasons, alternative tourism in developing countries has been much more limited and less successful than Mass Tourism. The alternative projects in the Third World are frequently handicapped by the cost of international travel in the first place and poor local connections within destinations in the second.

Language barrier, differences in culture and standards of living between hosts and guests tend to hinder communication and understanding (Smith & Eadington, 1992).

Some of the implications of alternative tourism need to be examined more closely. These include the reduction in numbers of tourists, the change in type of tourist, the education of all parties involved, and the impacts resulting from a new set of activities. Reducing numbers of tourists has two aspects, reducing numbers in areas where numbers are currently too great, and limiting potential visitors to levels compatible with capacity parameters. It is extremely difficult to reduce numbers in a free market situation without prejudicing the viability of the industry. Revenues can be expected to decline (unless massive market replacement occurs at the same time), which can result in loss of employment and reduction in local standard of living (Butler, 1990).

Also, soft tourists may not only represent a not large enough market, but may also not be a repeat market. While mass tourists are for the most part sedentary and spend their money in a limited number of locations, much of the expenditure of the alternative tourists may be pre-spent on packages or spent in small amounts in a wide variety of locations (Butler, 1990).

Furthermore, educating people is an alternative that is hard for Butler (1990) to reject, but it is a mammoth and long term project. He states that most people would probably accept the wisdom of the concept of sustainable development and developing “suitable” and low-impacting forms of tourism, but short-term reality dictates that the window of opportunity is often limited

and time-scales of most entrepreneurs are short. Those of a tourist spending a week on a beach are even shorter. It is not realistic, even if naively optimistic, to expect a tourist wishing to lie on a beach in the Caribbean to be too interested in the impact he or she may have on the social fabric of the island visited, especially when they may not wish to associate with local residents or move out of the hotel complex.

However, Alternative Tourism help cleaning physical surroundings, protecting environments and often the distinctive cultural patterns of local communities. It can be a significant factor in conserving the environment. Moreover, it also helps to conserve an area's cultural heritage.

Archaeological and historical places, distinctive architectural styles, local dance, music, drama, ceremonies, arts and crafts, dress, customs and value systems all comprise the culture of an area (McIntyre, 1993).

He emphasises on the fact that Alternative Tourism raises awareness concerning the impacts of tourism on the natural, cultural, and human environments. It ensures a fair distribution of benefits and costs. It incorporates planning and zoning which ensure tourism development appropriate to the carrying capacity of the ecosystem. It monitors, assesses and manages the impacts of tourism, develops reliable methods of environmental accountability, and counters any negative effect.

Furthermore, nature tourism encourages productive use of lands which are marginal for agriculture, enabling large tracts to remain covered in natural vegetation. Cultural tourism enhances local community esteem and provides the opportunity for greater understanding and communication among

peoples of diverse backgrounds. Environmentally sustainable tourism demonstrates the importance of natural and cultural resources to a community's economic and social well being and can help to preserve them.

As opposed to Mass Tourism development, which is predominated by multinationals and tends to be unplanned and uncontrolled, taking up the most scenic regions and altering them beyond repair, Alternative Tourism requires extensive initial planning with greater reliance on local labour, and local sources of capital in line with locally promulgated regulations. Tourism assumes a complementary industrial role emphasizing the importance to continuing traditional lifestyle patterns. Existing resources (e. g., buildings) are used and renovated when necessary rather than relying on new construction.

## **Features of Alternative Tourism**

Also known as Sustainable Tourism, Alternative Tourism adheres to the triple bottom-line of sustainability, that is to develop and progress without depleting environmental, socio-cultural and economic resources for future generations. In other words, these resources must be used, preserved and managed in such a way as to move forward, while keeping in mind the Native American proverb: ' we do not inherit the world from our ancestors, we are borrowing it from our children.'

Tourism can be environmentally feasible, as opposed to the pre-conceived idea exhibited by Mass Tourism during the past decades. It is not all about deforestation, land and water pollution or chains of gigantic resorts all over the place. ' Sea, Sun and Sand' Tourism, a major form of Mass Tourism, has



caused its own death by saturating the most popular and splendid coastal spots with hotel resorts, hence permanently disfiguring these locations physically, depleting and polluting its resources and attributes respectively. This has led to an increase in awareness amongst host communities and potential tourists alike, and hence emerged forms of tourism that aimed at enjoying a destination while minimizing alterations to nature and monitoring the impacts of visits at the same time.

First of all, environmentally sustainable tourism businesses would take into account the characteristics of a location at the Planning Stage of a project. This is usually part of the EIA (Environmental Impact Assessment). The fauna and flora would be meticulously studied and limited changes (or none at all) would be permitted, so that micro-ecosystems would be able to survive and cohabit along with the implementation of the project. This way, endangered species (both plants and animals) would still retain their habitat and the environment would be altered in the smallest possible way. Furthermore, the project should not be physically alienating to its surroundings, that is, it should be able to blend in and not be an eyesore. For instance, a state of the art hotel in a remote, under-developed village would be totally inappropriate, even if it respected environmental norms.

In the same breath, operating sustainable tourism commerce implies minimizing damages done to the environment through energy and waste management. As far as possible, sustainable forms of energy must be used, and energy-consumption must remain reasonable. Waste water

management is a must, and recycling must be practised as far as possible, for ethical disposal of both solid and liquid waste.

However, not all businesses are able to afford the above measures, especially, since the number of green-tourists is usually quite limited. This is where the concept of ‘ Carrying Capacity’ comes into effect. The physical carrying capacity of a destination or site, is the maximum number of visitors that it can contain at a particular time. In order to avoid permanent environmental changes and abuse, the number of visitors and the duration of their stay must be under strict control. This is also known as the limits of acceptable change and does not require much financial investment to be accomplished.

In addition, Mass Tourism brought along westernisation, the alienation of ethnic and local cultures and commodification throughout the years. Their consequences can be seen today, especially amongst the younger generations in destinations that have suffered Mass Tourism for several generations. The youth have often copied the beliefs and lifestyles so as to resemble those of foreigners, deeming western culture to be superior, and thus resulting in the loss of local cultural heritage and long-standing ancestral traditions. This is due to the fact that cultural exchange between tourists and locals has not been equitable, even though it is usually not in the intention of visitors to have such an impact on local beliefs and traditions. In order to counter this, tourists need to be educated on how to interact, behave and limit the exposure of their cultural identity, with respect to that of the host community.

Accordingly, commodification, which is the act of viewing local cultural, historical or religious identity merely as a tourism product, is yet another drawback of mass tourism. Places of worship or of sacred religious importance were being assaulted with camera flashes by hordes of tourists, who were not even aware of the appropriate dress codes and behaviour to be adopted on such sites. Thanks to sustainable tourism and the responsibility of tour operators towards the education of tourists, rules and guidelines have since then been forwarded so as to minimize the impact of loss of cultural identity. Indeed, it is now the tourist that adapts to the culture of locals during visits to sites of religious and cultural importance, thus resulting in a more authentic cultural exchange and experience.

Thirdly, the most immediate aspect of Alternative Tourism in a destination is the economic gains to the local community. Despite the fact that large-scale tourism generates astronomical amounts to tourism-related businesses and organisations, the majority of locals do not benefit from these profits first-handedly. In some cases, such as in franchise businesses, most of the profit goes back to the source-organisation, with local employees being paid with low salaries and slim chance of career advancement.

On a different level, the concept sustainability implies that one should make reasonable use of its available resources, in such a way as to progress, while benefiting to its environment and stakeholders. This largely goes against conventional tourism, whereby most of the resources required to make the tourism product happen comes from elsewhere, whether in terms of raw

materials, expertise and partially labour. It is therefore natural that economic rewards go abroad as well.

On the other side, Alternative Tourism encourages entrepreneurship in all forms, from hospitality, entertainment and craftsmanship of locals. They are often offered trainings, participate in empowerment programmes and sometimes even subsidised by the state to put their projects into motion.

Nevertheless, financial gains, which is not comparable to that of Mass Tourism goes directly to those local entrepreneurs and the money is usually spent within the country, hence improving income distribution, increasing standard of living and indirectly contributing to the national GDP.

## **The Emergence of Ecotourism**

Being one of the most popular segments of Alternative Tourism, Ecotourism is reaching a peak and gaining educational, sustainable and economic importance within the tourism industry, being one of its fastest growing sectors (UNWTO, 2003), grossing over \$335 billion a year. In today's world, it plays a crucial role in the conservation of nature, in educating tourists about sustainable environmental practices and in benefiting local people.

Ecotourism products consist of attractions, tours and accommodation, where each component is marketed and sold separately, but may be combined into packages as well. It is a form of tourism that targets a wide range of tourists, who are willing to experience a get-away holiday from the stress and monotony of everyday life. Its influence lies in the fact that unlike other

forms of tourism, it is diverse enough to attract tourists of different age groups, budgets, interests and occupations.

However, ecotourism poses a threat to its own existence and operations. Since the tourism product is settled within the type of ecosystem or environment that it promotes, there needs to be careful planning and management. Else, its activities may harm, deplete or alter the fragile and pristine biodiversities that it relies on for sustenance. Limits of acceptable change regarding social, cultural and environmental must be closely monitored in order to minimize impacts.

Ecotourism projects are usually of small-scale and low-impacting; waste output is minimized and recycled as far as possible, so as to cause the minimum intrusion and alterations to the surrounding ecosystem.

Biodegradable products are favoured over chemical detergents or products toxic or unhealthy for the environment. Clean and renewable energy forms, such as solar or photovoltaic panels, are popular energy sources in the most sophisticated eco-lodges as well as the use of fossil fuels are avoided.

Further, infrastructures are designed to be harmonious with the environment in which it is situated.

The actors involved in creating the ecotourism product include businesses, scientists, government agencies, non-governmental organisations and local or native communities. The active participation of guests or tourists, is essential for the product to be complete. It is interesting how this tends to foster collaboration and better understanding between the different

contributors to ecotourism, hence encouraging local entrepreneurship and strengthening local identity.

Emphasis must be stressed upon the preparation and education of ecotourists, before, during and after their holiday trip. This implies that guides and tour operators play a major role in consolidating the ecotourism product. They are responsible to instruct tourists about acceptable behaviour during their stay or trips, sensitize them to be environmentally-friendly and raise their awareness towards the need for sustainability, not only during their holidays, but also in their thinking and everyday lives.

Furthermore, their duties include instructing guests about the modes and limits of communication with respect to surrounding local or native culture. Ecotourism has the goal of improving and contributing to the well-being of these people, without altering their beliefs, culture or traditions, but promoting them while empowering their identity and pride.

Additionally, ecotourism projects often help natives and local communities to rehabilitate endangered species or animals and plants alike, reinstate their natural habitat and raise-awareness about them. Ecotourists are educated about the importance and relevance of such projects, if not encouraged to actively participate themselves.

The profit accumulated through ecotourism is usually re-injected into ecological projects and also to upheave the standard of living of locals and their everyday situation. In the case of culturally sensible communities, such

as natives, this is expended differently, in terms of medication and the protection, as well as conservation of their lands and culture.

## **Conclusion and Discussion**

Alternative Tourism and Ecotourism have both been operating in a moderately successful manner in Mauritius during the past decade and is continuously gaining in popularity, both among locals and tourists alike. Indigenous plants and species are being rehabilitated and their habitat sustained, although there have been some negligence on the part of some stakeholders. The Blue Bay Marine park had been flourishing in the beginning years, but the project is now undergoing a decline due to illegal fishing and the carrying capacity of human interactions exceeded through visits, snorkelling and deep-sea diving. It is however not too late to reverse the situation and additional efforts need to be input from all stakeholders.

On the bright side, small surrounding islands such as l'Île Plate and l'Île aux Aigrettes have known successful rehabilitation of their micro-biodiversities and human intervention is being closely monitored by environmental organisations.

Fortunately, Mauritius has the resources and potential to further promote Ecotourism and other forms of Alternative Tourism, such as hiking, outdoor tourism and mountaineering. Additional resources must be made available to qualified people and organisations to implement and diversify the Alternative Tourism projects possible on the island. Emphasis should be put on consistency and regular evaluation, to cater for weaknesses.

The objectives of sustainability however do not limit themselves to tourism and the whole Mauritian community must be sensitised for better environmental-friendly attitudes, which requires advocacy, education and a change of behaviour, which is a long-term and never-ending process, to protect, save and respect what remains of our nature and resources.