

The introduction to ecotourism tourism essay

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



2. 1 Introduction to Ecotourism

Ecotourism, which is also known as ecological tourism, is the responsible travel to fragile, pristine and usually protected areas that strives to be low impact and often small scale. 'Eco' is derived from the Greek word "oikos" which literally means the habitat and is an abbreviation of the term "ecology" which is the scientific study of the relation of living organisms to each other and their surroundings. Therefore, in this view, ecotourism essentially means ecological tourism; where ecological has both the environmental and social connotations.

Even though many travelers in pursuit of nature and culture already existed in the past like Claus-Dieter (Nick) Hetzer, an academic and adventurer from Forum International in Berkeley CA who coined the term "ecotourism" in 1965 and ran the first eco-tours in the Yucatan during the early 1970s (Source-The Encyclopedia of Ecotourism), it was Hector Ceballos-Lascurain, commonly known as the father of ecotourism, who popularized the term in 1983. The reason for that was for the sake of being at one with Mother Nature, sometimes preferably alone (Dowling R. and Page S., 2002)

Moreover, in 1987, ecotourism was made known internationally as a sign of environmental awareness through the publication of the Brundtland Report, also known as Our Common Future, by the United Nations Commission on Environment and Development. And as such, the United Nations celebrated the "International Year of Ecotourism" in the year 2002. Hence, on this basis, ecotourism attracted a number of researchers, philosophers and related institutions who were interested in the new emerging market.

2. 2 Definition of Ecotourism

Ecotourism has been defined and redefined as many times as there have been summits, conferences or even when articles have been written upon the topic. Since most definitions have been broad, ecotourism is not so much a word but a philosophy and a commitment which evolved from environmental consciousness of the 1960s (Page S. and Dowling R., 2002) and since then, there have been various streams of thoughts regarding ecotourism. These are dispersed across a wide array of definitions. Sometimes, it is easier to explain what ecotourism is not rather than to explain what it really is.

Ceballos-Lascurain captures the essence of ecotourism as “ environmentally responsible travel and visitation to relatively undisturbed natural areas, in order to enjoy, study and appreciate nature (and any accompanying cultural features – both past and present), that promotes conservation, has low negative visitor impact, and provides for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local populations” (Ceballos-Lascurain, 1996). This definition was officially adopted by IUCN in 1996 and it emphasizes on the importance of consuming the tourism product responsibly. Also according to this definition, ecotourism should be seen as a component of sustainable tourism which should embrace all types of tourism, including city and beach tourism. As it is known that the natural environment consists both of the natural resources as well as the local community, this definition recommends the respect of traditions, beliefs, values and cultures of these people as well as their environment. The concern of both the ecology and their people are emphasized upon, hence the ecological worldview has to be observed.

The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) is an American-based ecotourism association. The definition provided by this association about ecotourism is more comprehensive and states “ purposeful travel to natural areas to understand culture and natural history of the environment, taking care not to alter the integrity of the ecosystem, producing economic opportunities that make the conservation of the natural resources beneficial to the local people” (Lindberg and Hawkins, 1993). Similar to that of Ceballos-Lascurain, this definition also emphasizes heavily on the ecosystem and the local community. However, here it also encloses the economic opportunities that exist. This means that the amount of money obtained from the visitors of ecotourism sites is envisaged to sustain, preserve and maintain the existing resources and assets. Furthermore, local people are supposed to gain business opportunities to enhance their livelihood. It should be noted that it is very important to maintain the attractiveness of the ecotourism destination for future visitors to come and this normally cannot be done freely. Therefore, the mention of economic opportunities in the above definition is essential to explain that the survival of any ecotourism destination site lies in its proper maintenance as well as the harmonious maintenance of its people.

All the definitions advanced above provide no specific mention on ‘ animals’, which also form an important part of the ecosystem. Definitely, ‘ natural areas’ comprise of not only green scenery but also of the fauna. In certain regions of African countries, hunting is also classified as an ecotourism activity and this contradicts the very essence of this phenomenon, which is about appreciating and participating without disturbing the ecosystem.

Therefore, phrases like “ without endangering or threatening the livelihood of animals” should have been incorporated in these definitions as animals form an integral part of nature together with the flora.

TOURISM Moreover, according to Beaumont (1998), ecotourism is a form of tourism under the subset of nature tourism. The difference is the three main points in the criteria, a natural setting, ecological sustainability and environmental learning and understanding. These criteria are the basic defining points of ecotourism as a sustainable form of tourism. Beaumont (1998) illustrates this statement on the following diagram:

NATURE-BASED TOURISM

Natural Setting

Ecologically Sustainable

Environmentally Educative

Figure: Defining Ecotourism using three key Principles

Source: Stephen P. & Dowling R. (2002)

Despite various interpretations of this growing phenomenon, all the definitions stipulated above carry the principles of ecotourism as being: nature-based, ecologically sustainable, environmentally educative and locally beneficial.

Ecotourism is therefore recognized as a subset of alternative tourism where the major motivation for travel is to use, see and experience the natural

environment (Cater and Lowman, 1994). Ultimately, it is a segment of the travel industry, a subset of nature tourism, which is in turn a subset of tourism (Freedman, 1995).

2.3 Evolution of Ecotourism Concept

The development of new forms of tourism has evolved in response to a more sensitive international climate which was the growing awareness of environmental and conservation damage caused by tourism. This has emerged in conjunction with the Rio Summit and the triple bottom line concept of environmental, economic and social sustainability has been established. Green tourism, adventure tourism, nature tourism, community-based tourism, heritage tourism are all labels that were generally encapsulated in the term ' ecotourism'.

The term ecotourism was first used by Hector Ceballos-Lascurain in 1983, and was used to describe nature-based travel to relatively undisturbed areas with an emphasis on education. The concept, had however, developed to a scientifically based approach to the planning, management and development of sustainable tourism products and activities.

According to Boo E. (1990), ecotourism can assist in spreading economic activity and growth and provide an opportunity for diversification of the economy.

2.4 Importance of Ecotourism

Ecotourism is becoming even more popular across the world, but it has a significant practical value in developing countries where the needs of

impoverished communities may conflict directly with the need to capitalize on the growing tourism industry. It can also be noticed that many areas worldwide have been designated as tourism hotspots by developers without even giving a thought to the impact that this decision will have on the local communities. These communities may depend on these respective areas for food and shelter, but their concerns are buried beneath the potential for financial revenue.

Thus, ecotourism is a means to counter to this problem. It aims to create viable and sustainable tourism opportunities, and in that way limits the impact that all these activities will have on the environment. It also helps in improving the lives of the local people living in these areas. The ecotourism concept consists of core principles which include the minimization of industrial impact on the environment, building environmental and cultural awareness, empowering local communities, raising awareness of the political, environmental and social issues of the country concerned and finally to ensure that the experience is positive for all parties including the visitors and the hosts.

The aim is to achieve responsible and sustainable tourism practices to the benefit of all and detriment of none. Knowledge is one of the most important factors in the success of any ecotourism venture. Those proposing the project must gain intimate knowledge of the area, the fauna, the flora and the communities living there. They must understand how these different factors may impact on each other and how a small change in anyone of them will affect the rest. They must understand the culture of managing people's

relationship with the environment, and how they view concepts such as hunting, farming and gathering materials for personal use.

It is vital to include the local communities in the project, not merely as grateful beneficiaries of charity, but as empowered and informed team members. This is because their input is to be valued, as chances are that they understand the area and complex ecosystems better than anyone else involved in the project.

The ultimate goal is to create a sustainable resource that protects both the people and the nature involved. Twenty-four years ago, in 1987, the World Commission on Environment and Development stated that sustained development implied, “ meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” This sentiment is just as applicable now as it was then.

Equally important is that within all this concern for sustainability and empowerment, the tourism aspect of ecotourism should not be forgotten. In 2002, the Cape Town Declaration on Responsible Tourism stated that responsible tourism should provide a more enjoyable experience for tourists through meaningful interaction with local people, and a greater understanding of cultural, social and environmental issues. What is really important at the end is that with little planning and compassion, all of this can be achieved.

2. 5 Benefits of Ecotourism

Ecotourism is that alternative type of tourism which aims at minimizing the negative impacts of the traditional mass tourism while maximizing the benefits for the host destination and stakeholders. As an environmentally friendly tourism, it is a viable way of creating economic and social benefits at local and national levels while concentrating upon environmental conservation and protection. The benefits of ecotourism vary and differ from regions to regions and also in relation to the nature of the attractions.

2. 5. 1 Economic benefits on host community

According to Hvenegaard and Dearden (1998), economic benefits of ecotourism occur in various ways and may generate higher economic returns than other resource activities. Moreover, ecotourism diversifies the local economy mainly in rural areas where the economic activities are declining with time. Also, many opportunities for employment and income are generated by ecotourism activities to the local people paying attention particularly to the disadvantaged and remote rural communities.

Consequently, it generates foreign exchange, enables the host community to cope with and enjoy the rising standards of living and on the overall, ecotourism contributes to the economic prosperity of a destination.

Furthermore, as income is being transferred to remote and economically-disadvantaged regions of a destination through eco-tourists' visits and expenses, ecotourism is considered as an effective vehicle. Moreover, ecotourism benefits other domestic industries such as those which are involved in accommodation, transport and food services. It contributes to a great extent to the development of markets involved in the creation of

handicrafts, artwork for souvenirs, and many other local products. Thus, ecotourism provides business opportunities in various sectors for the local community.

Revenue generation for conservation

Ecotourism generates revenues that can be reinvested for conservation and protection of ecotourism sites at destination. It contributes to the conservation and the effective management of the natural undisturbed areas, in particular the ecotourism sites, through mechanisms such as entry fees at sites, charitable institutions and non-governmental institutions. It is vital source of revenue and helps setting up natural protected areas such as national parks and nature reserves. Ecotourism has a unique potential of preserving and maintaining an area in its natural undisturbed state, thus preventing the exploitation of the resources it encloses. As the eco-tourists are willing to pay a fee for experiencing the natural environment and indulging in these activities, a large percentage of the revenue is used for the protection and maintenance of the natural sites at destination. A study by Laarman and Gregersen (1996) suggested that a range of categories of fees may be levied. These categories of fees and charges in nature-based tourism are general entrance fees, fees for use, concession fees, royalties and profit shares, licences and permits, taxes and voluntary donations.

Ecotourism offers the opportunity to generate revenues for the protection and conservation of the ecosystem, biological diversity and for research efforts. For example, according to a study about visitors to Costa Rica's

Monteverde Cloud Forest, visitors are disposed to pay an average of \$118 to ensure park protection (Fennell, 1999).

Empowerment of local community

According to Hall (2002), “ ecotourism with its small-scale development, provides opportunities for local empowerment, encourages the use of local knowledge and labour, promotes local ownership, perpetuates local identity and strengthens economic equity”. It definitely has got a beneficial effect on the local communities as they are being empowered. In other words, ecotourism enables the participation and the integration of the local people in the planning process and running of the businesses. It can, in addition, be noted that nowadays more and more students are willing to pursue higher studies in tourism and earn a better standard of living. Thus, ecotourism related activities allow them to acquire more knowledge about the future development taking place in that field in their communities and hence allowing them to participate in the planning process of these businesses as they will be integrating their ideas about the development. It further promotes the local community involvement and hence empowerment by involving the host community in decision-making and granting them the right to manage the resources in their respective areas.

2. 5. 4 Contribution to environmental protection

Ecotourism contributes enormously to the on-going process of protection of the land and its resources. First of all, it encourages local community, especially tourism students, to understand the negative impacts of conventional mass tourism at a destination and attempts to minimize these

impacts on both the natural and socio-cultural environments. Ecotourism equally contributes to the preservation of the environment by protecting natural areas from development for alternative uses such as agriculture. Therefore, it favours the practice of environmentally-friendly patterns of resource use and is an alternative to environmentally-damaging industries. Furthermore, ecotourism promotes heritage conservation for the future generations to come through the creation of numerous national parks, protected areas and nature reserves. In countries like Rwanda, ecotourism is the third largest source of foreign exchange earnings. Successful projects such as the ' Mountain Gorilla Project' has not only convinced the government to protect the natural habitat of the Gorillas but also encouraged support in many other areas namely the different reserves and parks of the country.

2. 5. 5 Environmental awareness and cross-cultural exchange

Ecotourism generates awareness amongst the various destination stakeholders and creates incentives for further action. In addition, it helps to promote cross-cultural understanding between the host community and the eco-tourists. In Mauritius, tourism students are being educated about the term tourism and ' ecotourism' as from their very early age. This is in a way to sensitize them about the benefits of ecotourism towards the conservation of the natural environment at destination. Being the ones more aware of the facts, they are going to communicate much more easily with the eco-tourists. Hence, this will encourage cross-cultural understanding between the host community and the eco-tourists. Furthermore, ecotourism is different

from traditional beach tourism as it diverts and educates the visitors. After learning the concept of ecotourism, the flora, fauna and culture of a specific area and experiencing the natural environment, the travelers will be far more motivated towards the safeguard of these resources. Besides, ecotourism provides a lot of opportunities for cross-cultural exchange and understanding between the local people and the visitors through personal contacts. A very good example in Mauritius is that local people especially young tourism students are involved in many ecotourism activities round the island in the various private reserves and they even work like guides and they have the chance to be in contact with the visitors. Hence, they are learning a lot from the visitors and in addition promoting their culture to them. Moreover, ecotourism generates significant benefits and has the potential to ensure sustainability. This is the main reason why it is being adopted by many destinations.

2. 6 Critics on Ecotourism

Even though ecotourism is known to be a form of “responsible tourism”, much controversy about its use exists. This is so because some players merely use it as a label to attract higher-spending tourists to a destination. It has been argued as a negative force of social change in the isolated areas of the world. For Anita Pleumarom, a famous ecotourism author, ecotourism is fraught with images and myths, many of which bear little relation to what happens to local people in practice (Pleumarom, 1996). Besides, in an article titled “The Nation”, she argued that ecotourism can be just as damaging as honest hedonistic holiday-making and she also exposed how ecotourism is being used as a cover for ‘eco-terrorism’. Furthermore, it is assumed that

ecotourism is inherently small scale and low impact. However, experience shows that most tourism activities start small, become popular and then grow. Also, most forms of tourism grow 'naturally' as they become more affordable, unless regulations are introduced to control the industry and afterwards they are adopted by the mass market. Hence, there is no guarantee that today's small-scale ecotourism will not become mass tourism tomorrow.

Moreover, according to Wyatt, S (1997), eco-tourists may in fact be travelling to remote areas in order to experience the customs and rituals of native cultures; however, they may not come equipped with a certain cultural sensitivity. Also in areas reserved for conservation, many governments do not have enough funds to manage and protect these efficiently. Therefore, these areas are destroyed. Certain African countries such as Ghana and Burundi are examples for this statement.

Moreover, many authors, commentators and environmentalists are now starting to consider whether alternatives to mass improvement are truly sustainable in the long run [Butler R, (1990); Wheeler B, (1991, 1994); Shackley M, (1996); Wall G, (1997)]. For instance, in a paper entitled 'Is ecotourism sustainable?', Wall G (1997) pointed out the issue of whether or not forms of mass tourism development can be environmentally compassionate. Contradicting in terms, some commentators argued that ecotourism cannot be sustainable if it is regarded only as a market segment. As a consequence, the entire concept of ecotourism is now under extreme analysis. Wight (1993) listed the many forms of tourism which have been

renamed as ecotourism namely: eco-tour, eco-travel, eco-adventure, eco-vacation, eco-cruise, eco-safari, and much more. In addition, Cater E (1994) pointed out that ecotourism thus interpreted, may be environmentally centred but not ecologically sound. Campbell L (1999) instituted that one of the most dangerous aspect of ecotourism is when prosperous visitors and tourists embark on eco-tour largely to ' mark off' another glamorous destination which they could crow about, a phenomenon Campbell referred to as ' ego-tourism'.

Hence, ecotourism can be a boon, but also a bane if its associated facets which include positive, sustainable, negative and non-sustainable ones are not properly planned and managed.

2. 7 Community Involvement

Ecotourism is a form of tourism that should be both environmentally responsible and potentially beneficial to the local people. In fact, the involvement of the local community in tourism projects has become an important issue in development studies. While many ecotourism projects have been developed in or near protected areas such as national parks, protected forests, and nature reserves, these areas usually exclude the local population who may depend on the natural resources in those areas. This approach creates a conflict between local population and other parties involved in the projects. While nearby residents are the most straightforwardly concerned and affected by the founding of parks and protected areas, they also stand to take advantage the most by their conservation. By bringing residents into the business of ecotourism, not only

can local people meet their economic requirements, but they can also preserve and improve the 'sense of place' that is decisive for guaranteeing continuous conservation.

In the past, inadequate consideration to qualitative socio-economic impacts had been a key reason why many tourism development plans were not implemented (Baud Bovy M, 1982). There has now been a move away from the narrow concern with physical or promotional planning facilitating the growth of tourism, to a broader more balanced approach recognizing the needs and views of not only tourists and developers but also the wider community, Dowling R (1991, 1997). Thus, the participation of residents, especially tourism students, in ecotourism planning is fundamental as they will have a degree of empowerment in the ecotourism development process. They will also contribute to the success of the ecotourism projects by sharing their knowledge about the local areas where the developments are to be made. Moreover, by participating in conservation programs and by providing human resources to the different ecotourism developments, they will show a deep interest in ecotourism activities and will also share the positive economic benefits of the projects. Hence, students who want to make a career in the field of tourism will benefit from the projects through employment opportunities giving rise to improved social and economic conditions and furthermore having continuous access to the local resources of their area.

Moreover, an increase in the participation of more youngsters from the local community in the ecotourism developments will lead to a simultaneous

increase in the chances of success of these ecotourism developments. Though youth participation itself can cost time and money in the short run, the process will result in activities that are based upon issues facing youth and upon their understanding of problems and will be therefore more relevant to the needs of their generation. Their participation can lead to better targeting of benefits to youth, the group that can best identify the impact of specific activities. It can also help to secure the sustainability of activities as youth, as primary stakeholders, will be more invested in their momentum. Hence, participation of local community, especially youngsters, in ecotourism activities is important and beneficial for all the stakeholders of the ecotourism development therefore leading to the latter's success.

2. 8 Conservation

Conservation has been defined as “ the management of human use of the biosphere so that it may yield the greatest sustainable benefit to protect generations while maintaining its potentials to meet the needs and expectations of the future generations” by the World Conservation Strategy. (IUCN 1980; S. 1. 6)

According to Woodley (1993), parks were at one end of a continuum of human land use which ranged from cities to spotless wilderness.

Conservation falls along a scale ranging from extractive use, protection to preservation. Furthermore, Miller (1989) suggested that in 1901 the nations of Europe and colonial Africa prepared a document on the nomenclature of concepts related to parks, and later revised and accepted the documents in 1933 in London.

Despite the fact, in 1992, Alderman stated that the motivation for starting a private reserve was mixed. Some were profit-making ventures, while others were NGO's who were dedicated to habitat protection and research. In addition, many of the newer private reserves had been developed specifically with ecotourism in mind and cater largely to the up-scale market according to Langholz and Brandon (2001). When compared to the volume of literature review available on protected areas, the sector appeared to a great extent under-researched, given the relative success of private ecotourism reserves.

It can be said that one of the harsh realities of park management is the significant lack of resources for effective visitor and environment management.

2. 9 Education

Both the host community and the tourists should be taught about nature conservation and protection as well as the respect of the different cultures visited. Very often the eco-tourists are eager to learn things from what they are seeing for example the landscape, ecology and the people. Hence, local inhabitants, especially tourism students, play a very important role in how the visitors view the destination. By becoming educated hosts and guides, they can encourage visitors to see different aspects of their communities as more than a site for recreation. Tourism students are being given much importance as they are the ones learning about tourism since their early age at secondary and tertiary levels now and therefore, are the future ones to guide and prosper the tourism industry in Mauritius.

The educative characteristics of ecotourism are a key element that differentiates it from other forms of nature-based tourism. Education about the environment and its interpretation are important tools in creating an enjoyable and meaningful ecotourism experience. Education can also be a useful management tool for natural areas. This is so because, ecotourism attracts people who wish to interact with the natural environment in order to develop their knowledge, awareness and appreciation about it and hence interpretation will help the tourists and locals to see the big picture regarding the environment. According to Crabtree A and Black R (2000), 'interpretation provided by ecotourism has a critical role in contributing to the world's environmental awareness', indicating that there are five key elements to make ecotourism educative in relation to the environment: make it personal, fun, relevant, unique and effective.

2. 10 Sustainable Tourism

Sustainable tourism is tourism that minimizes costs and maximizes the benefits of tourism for natural environments and local communities, and can be carried out indefinitely without harming the resources on which it depends. Also, conventional tourism often does not benefit the local community when tourists' revenue leaks to the outside operators. Thus, as a result, tourism can destroy the very resources on which it depends. In contrast, sustainable tourism is deliberately planned to benefit the local residents, respect local culture, conserve natural resources, direct more of the profits to the local community, and last but not least, educate both tourists and local residents about the importance of conservation.

Sustainable tourism embraces all segments of the industry with guidelines

and criteria that seek to reduce environmental impacts, particularly the use of non-renewable resources, using measurable benchmarks, and to improve tourism's contribution to sustainable development and environmental conservation.

According to World Conservation Union (1996), sustainable tourism is environmentally responsible travel and visitation to natural areas, in order to enjoy and appreciate nature and any accompanying cultural features, both past and present, in a way that promotes conservation, has a low visitor impact and provides for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local peoples. Moreover, according to Hunter (1997) and Hardy and Beeton (2001), sustainable tourism can be seen as a way to manage tourism and tourism relationships in order to avoid compromising the natural and cultural resources.

Therefore, sustainable tourism minimizes environmental impacts using benchmarks, improves contribution to local sustainable development, requires lowest possible consumption of non-renewable resources, stresses local ownership, sustains the well-being of the local people, supports efforts to conserve the environment and finally contributes to biodiversity. This is why various organizations worldwide have adopted sustainable tourism policy to secure their store of natural resources as well as their industry.

2. 11 Relationship between Ecotourism and Sustainable Tourism

There is a very important relationship that lies between sustainable tourism and ecotourism. This is so, because both of them emphasize on the concept

of the triple bottom line. The economic, ecological, social and cultural aspects are the first priority before embarking on any type of development. Hence, we all need to be aware of and be well-educated about this relationship as it is only then that we are going to be able to travel safely and environmentally friendly in the future. When it comes to ecotourism and sustainable tourism, there are things in particular that are important to take into consideration.

While there are differences and similarities between the two, ecotourism and sustainable tourism both really represent their own issue. The objectives of ecotourism are strikingly similar to that of sustainable tourism as outlined by Shaw and Williams (2000). They contend that sustainable tourism is akin to sustainable development and that sustainable tourism is subset of ecotourism. Sustainable tourism is often considered to be relatable to nature and takes into consideration everything from host peoples, communities and cultures. Hence, sustainable tourism as same as ecotourism educates not only the tourists but also the host communities and makes them more aware and sensitive about the physical and cul