

Ecotourism: Strategy for Sustainable Development through Sustainable Tourism

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Abstract:

Ecotourism has been proposed as the strategy to achieve sustainable development. The present work tried to explore the meaning and scope of ecotourism. The topic of sustainable tourism or nature-based tourism has been explored. Its educational component has been analyzed. The paper also examine the impacts of ecotourism as well as scope of research in the new discipline of tourism has been analyzed.

Keywords: Ecotourism, Sustainable Development, Nature Conservation, Mass Tourism, Economic Development, Green Development, Nature based Tourism.

1.1: Introduction:

Since the publication of the Bruntland report in 1987, through the Earth Summit in Rio and, more recently, the Summit of Johannesburg, the concept of "sustainable development" is on lots of lips. A growing number of researchers are looking today on this paradigm and try to better understand how to reconcile socio-economic development and

Environmental Protection. Despite the few years it has behind it, the notion of sustainable development does not still not unanimous, both in the general population and among scientists (Reveret and Gendron, 2002). The number high number of definitions in circulation as well as the complexity inherent in such a concept, which makes borrowings in almost all disciplines, allow a large number interpretation and, as a result, contribute to the general confusion.

The specificity of sustainable development lies in the recognition of the environment as an element of development. The novelty of taking into account environment in development issues we forces us to explore other fields of activity hitherto considered marginals. "One thing is absolutely certain: in no countries, let alone on the entire planet, the evolution contemporary human civilization has a character sustainable. Thus, the idea of sustainable development is a challenge, a urgent call for the exploration of ways that would allow us to reach (Moldan, 1996; 72). Among the array of tools proposed in order to move towards the sustainable development of our companies, there is one that is now attracting attention: ecotourism.

Since the early 1970s, tourism has been the industry that is experiencing the strongest growth worldwide (Boo, 1990). With the emergence of new social concerns and environmental, it is increasingly confronted with the question of its compatibility with the development of local communities and environmental protection (McCool, 1995). Ecotourism is therefore often seen

as a miracle solution capable of reconciling development economy, the protection of the environment and the well-being of communities. “Around the world, ecotourism has been acclaimed as a panacea: a way of financing the conservation and scientific research, protect pristine ecosystems and fragile, to benefit rural communities, to promote development in poor countries, to strengthen the ecological and cultural sensitivity, to instil an awareness social and environmental impact on the tourist industry, to satisfy and educate tourists and even, according to some, to build the world peace² (Honey, 1999). However, few studies have attempted to characterize sustainable ecotourism and examples positive ecotourism are still rare (Lopez-Espinosa de los Monteros, 2002). In addition, some researchers (see among others

Weinberg et al., 2002) question whether ecotourism can be viable over time without turning into a simple mass tourism, which generally deviates from the principles of sustainable development.

To fully understand the contribution of ecotourism to the realization of sustainable development, it is still necessary to understand its origin, the evolution, the ambiguities conveyed by the term and the principles basis that it supports. We will see that behind its simplicity apparent hides an impressive number of areas of uncertainty. There is therefore no consensus on the role that a such an activity could play in achieving a balance between the socio-economic development and the protection of the environment.

1.2: Ecotourism: Origin, Definitions and Concepts

Ecotourism developed in the wake of the movement environment that took shape in the early 1970s. Growing public interest in the environment and outdoor-oriented travel, coupled with the growing dissatisfaction with mass tourism, showed the industry tourism that there was a place for ecotourism (Orams, 1995; Weaver, 1998, Honey, 1999). The understanding and acceptance of the principles of conservation and sustainability by a growing portion of the population also participated in the phenomenal evolution of the term ecotourism (Orams, 1995).

There is no consensus on the origin of the term ecotourism (Fennell, 1999). According to some authors, it would have appeared for the first time in English in an article by Romeril (1985) (Blamey, 2001). However, the Mexican environmentalist Ceballos-Lascurain used the Spanish word ecoturismo again earlier, while the National Forest Service of Canada was, as early as 1973, promoting ecotours along the Trans-Canada Highway (Fennell, 1999). Recently, we even traced the term to an article by Hertzler (1965) that used it to explain the complex relationship between tourists and the environment and the cultures with which they interact (Fennell, 1999). However, it is Budowski (1976) who is generally cited as the pioneer concerning the concept even ecotourism (Blamey, 2001; Orams, 2001; Honey, 1999). In his article *Tourism and Environmental Conservation: Conflict, Coexistence or Symbiosis?*, Budowski recognizes that the relationship between tourism and the environment nature tends to be conflicting, but that the potential exists for a relationship based on mutual benefits. His description of the symbiotic relationship that could ensue resembles the idea contemporary view of ecotourism, without however use the term (Blamey, 2001). The dissemination of the term and concept is often associated with Elizabeth Boo whose book,

Ecotourism: The Potentials and Pitfalls (Boo, 1990), contained a definition put forward by Ceballos-Lascurain at the end of 1980s (Honey, 1999). Table 1 contains a sample of a few definitions that are frequently encountered in the literature on ecotourism.² The original version reads: “Around the world, ecotourism as been hailed as a panacea: a way to fund conservation and scientific research, protect fragile and pristine ecosystems, benefit rural communities, promote development in poor countries, enhance ecological and cultural sensitivity, instill environmental awareness and a social conscience in the travel industry, satisfy and educate the discriminating tourist, and, some claim, build world peace”.

While a definition like that of Ceballos-Lascurain (1987) emphasizes a sought-after proximity to the nature by tourists, the more recent definitions (see that of Honey) have instead sought to shed light on a variety of principles associated with the concept of sustainable development (Blamey, 2001). As part of this trend, participants in the first World Ecotourism Summit, held in

Quebec in 2002, recognized that ecotourism encompasses principles of sustainable tourism with respect to the impacts of this activity on the economy, society and the environment and that, in addition, it includes the following particular principles which distinguish from the broader notion of sustainable tourism (World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) and Program for United Nations Environment (UNEP), 2002)

- ecotourism actively contributes to the protection of natural and cultural heritage;
- ecotourism includes local communities and indigenous peoples in its planning, development and its exploitation and contributes to their well-being;
- ecotourism offers visitors an interpretation of the natural and cultural heritage;
- ecotourism lends itself better to the practice of travel individual as well as organized trips for small groups.

More concisely, Blamey (1997, 2001) argues that aanalysis of definitions leads us to consider three dimensions which constitute the very essence of the concept of ecotourism:

- Nature-based tourism;
- An educational component;
- A need for sustainability.

It is mainly from these dimensions that we will discuss in the next section.

1.3: Nature-based tourism

The natural environment is intimately linked to ecotourism and this privileged relationship is particularly evident in the first definitions of ecotourism (Blamey, 2001). Valentine (1992) identifies three main dimensions associated with nature-based tourism: experience, style and place.

The experience will vary in its dependence on nature, the intensity interaction, social context and duration. The style is associated for example the necessary infrastructure, the size and the composition of the group or the duration of the visit. The place varies in terms of accessibility, fragility or nature (management and access private vs. public, for example).

Although nature-based tourism seems at first glance easily identifiable, the following question deserves to be asked: what really constitutes an experience nature-oriented? Does the automobile crossing of a wooded valley qualifies as such, or else the driver must stop and go for a walk through the trees and ferns? And if he does, how long must he wander? Does an environment greatly modified by man can all the same even qualify as an ecotourism site as long as all the other principles are respected (Blamey, 2001)? Does a walk in a tree planting or canoe trip on a man-made lake is a nature-based experience?

The question of proximity is often raised when it comes to time to consider whether a tourism experience involving a natural element can be considered as such (Blamey, 2001).

But here again, we could debate at length the meaning of this requirement.

A boundary will have to be drawn somewhere in order to make operationalize the definition of nature-based tourism and, through the very fact of ecotourism. It goes without saying that subjectivity cannot then be avoided and any definition of these concepts will have an arbitrary component (Blamey, 1997).

1.4: Educational Component

It is first necessary to define three terms sometimes used indistinctly when we approach the field of education in the broad sense: learning, education and interpretation.

Unlike learning, which is a natural process which occurs throughout our lives, mostly from fortuitously, education involves a conscious process, planned, sequential and systematic based on defined objectives and using specific learning procedures (Kalinowski and Weiler, 1992). For its part, the interpretation is an educational activity that aims to understand the world and the relationships between its different elements through the use of objects originals, practical experience and use of materials illustrated, rather than simply communicating information factual (Tilden, 1977 cited in Moscardo, 1998). Though almost all nature-based tourism involves some degree of learning, it is education and interpretation that serve key elements and characteristics of ecotourism according to Blamey (2001).

This educational dimension is obviously vast and sufficiently subjective to include a host of motivations and interactions between the tourist and the environment (Weaver, 2001). Weaver (2001; 11) also states that: “some ecotourists neglect any form of interpretation, preferring simply to observe and soak up the natural environment in their own way and perhaps even in a subconscious level. In such cases, the educational component can be so subjective and obscure as to evade all form of measurement, and is probably best described as appreciative rather than educational experience. The border between education/learning/appreciation and their absence can then become so vague that the tourist product no longer meets this criterion³”.

So if we want to be able to distinguish ecotourism from nature-oriented tourism based on the educational experience, it

It will once again be necessary to clarify what this dimension conveys.

1.5: Durability

Considering that tourism is the largest industry in international level, its potential to contribute to the development sustainable is substantial (Hunter, 1997). Two principles related to sustainability are regularly mentioned in ecotourism: (1) contribution to the local economy and (2) support for conservation (Blamey, 2001). This implies that if communities are harvesting enough fruit from the tree of ecotourism and that in addition ecotourism actively participates in conservation of the natural environment, we are heading strong probably towards sustainability. But how can we determine that a tourism experience sufficiently supports local communities and conservation to qualify ecotourism? How to decide whether the benefits to local communities in the form of jobs and income justify the irreversible losses with regard to their identity cultural (Blamey, 2001)?

3 The English version reads: ‘some ecotourists disregard all forms of external interpretation, preferring simply to observe and absorb the natural environment on their own terms and perhaps even at a subconscious level. In such cases, the educational component may be so subjective and obscure as to be beyond measurement, and is probably better described as an appreciative experience rather than an educational one. At this point, the line between education/learning/appreciation, and their absence, may also become so blurred that the tourism product no longer meets this criterion’.

While we generally agree on the basic principles of sustainable development, few concepts are so ambiguous when the time comes for interpretation and implementation (Weaver, 2001). Although it is possible to reconcile the many interpretations and ambiguities around sustainability, the problem of determining whether or not such an ecotourism project adheres to sustainable development remains intact. Attempts to solve this problem are faced with the flagrant lack of knowledge in the field, both in the sciences environmental than in tourism (Weaver, 2001; 14). By

Consequently, on the question of the sustainability of ecotourism, Weaver (2001; 15) takes the following position:

Ecotourism and its relation to certain other forms of tourism

We must not forget that ecotourism is first and foremost a form of tourism and that in this sense it should be situated more specifically in relation to other forms of tourism with which it is often confused, mainly tourism focused on nature, adventure tourism and cultural tourism.

While nature-based tourism and adventure tourism are rather defined on the basis of the recreational activities of tourists, ecotourism is defined also, if not more, by the benefits that it is

likely to bring, both to the conservation than to local communities (Honey, 1999). Like us mentioned earlier, ecotourism is closely linked to the natural environment. However, it is important to distinguish ecotourism of simple nature tourism. As pointed out Honey (1999; 64), there is frequently a vagueness concerning the boundaries between nature-based tourism and the concept multidimensional ecotourism. Ecotourism adheres to principles (at least in theory) than the more vague notion of nature-based tourism is not required to share. So much in literature that in practice, the two are often mixed up, considering forms of tourism based on the natural environment as being ecotourism, but which do not meet its principles. Nature-based tourism happens to be a form more general of tourism within which one can find, for example, adventure tourism or tourism focused on hunting or fishing. Ecotourism is thus seen as a portion of nature-based tourism and the relationship between the two can be represented as follows:

To be considered adventure tourism, an activity where a product must incorporate three elements (Weaver, 2001):

- An element of risk;
- A high level of physical exertion;
- A need for the tourist to possess skills specialized to safely participate in the activity.

For Lequin (2001; 13), “adventure tourism corresponds generally to an outdoor activity that takes place in undeveloped natural areas where nature serves as a support, but does not constitute an objective in itself, contrary to ecotourism. So there is a difference in attitude fundamental between the observation of nature, as is the case for ecotourism, and the conquest of it, in the case of the adventure tourism. In short, these two forms of tourism are looking for a quality environment but for reasons different: one for observing nature and the other for to conquer ”.

Some forms of ecotourism can be considered as adventure tourism. However, for several reasons, general adventure tourism does not qualify as ecotourism (Weaver, 2001). First, several activities adventure tourism are not nature-oriented. Next, as is the case with nature-based tourism, this form of tourism does not require meeting the criteria of durability. Another distinction concerns the nature of the interaction between the participant and the tourist attraction: then that the ecotourist seeks an educational experience, the tourist of adventure desires in the first place an environment which will facilitate the much-sought-after risk and physical exertion (Weaver, 2001).

Although ecotourism generally has a component culture, it is not necessarily synonymous with cultural tourism.

While the latter emphasizes the cultural component, in ecotourism, this element is mostly secondary (Weaver, 2001). Moreover, as one guesses enough well, the experience of cultural tourism does not rely necessarily on the natural environment (the tour of the museums of

Florence, for example). Considering that adventure tourism and cultural tourism can sometimes be intertwined, as is sometimes the case, for example, during a hunting activity in Indigenous

environment where traditional techniques are shared with tourists, we can illustrate their relationship with ecotourism as follows:

1.6: Places Favored by Ecotourism

By emphasizing the protection of the environment nature, protected areas⁵ are becoming privileged places for ecotourism, which depends largely on the resources natural (Lawton, 2001). On the other hand, the rarity of these spaces, their exceptional character and the thirst of the markets for increasingly exclusive products and for natural environments intact require great vigilance in their use (Couture, 2002). According to Goodwin (1996), ecotourism can benefit protected areas in three ways: by generating money to manage and protect natural habitats and species, by giving local communities the chance to make gains economic through protected areas and by providing a means whereby people's interest in conservation can be increased.

Increasingly, ecotourism is perceived as the best way of conceiving tourism in these often fragile and susceptible to human disturbance. At this point that ecotourism is, in some countries, making its appearance in the strict protected areas⁶ while it was generally banned there.

This is the case in Russia for example, where following the fall of the communism, the support of the Russian government to areas protected has decreased by 60-90% (Ostergren, 1999).

Ecotourism is thus seen as an acceptable tool for finance their basic activities, i.e. research and conservation of ecosystems (Moralyova and Ledovskikh, 1999). However, because there are cultural and spiritual reasons why these populations engage in such practices, offering them alternative sources of income is often a simplistic strategy with little success (Michaelidou et al., 2002; 607).

The practice of ecotourism is not strictly limited to these public protected areas. For example, there is a whole network of private protected areas, one of the best known being probably The Monteverde Cloud Forest Preserve, in Costa- Ric. This reserve was born in 1973 thanks to private donations and it is today operated by the tropical science center of San Jose (Wearing and Neil, 1999). Over the years, she is become one of the most popular destinations in the country.

Ecotourism Insofar as its principles are respected, ecotourism should be able to be practiced wherever there is an environment natural adequate and able to withstand the pressure of visitors.

The advantage of protected areas is that their organization often well-structured facilitates the management of tourist activities, limiting possible negative effects on the natural environment and sociocultural.

1.7: The impacts of ecotourism

Due to its specific characteristics, ecotourism should be accompanied by positive effects on the environment natural and socio-cultural. Under these conditions, the measurement of costs and the economic, ecological and social benefits of ecotourism is different from that of traditional tourism or massive. The usual ratios, particularly in terms of profitability economic, must be able to be assessed in a context which assesses the impact of the ecotourism activity not only in terms

of financial profitability but perhaps especially in terms of impact on income, activity and social conditions of local populations (UNWTO and UNEP, 2002).

With the rapid growth of ecotourism at the level internationally, there is growing awareness of the impacts of this activity. Of course, these are going to depend on how we will define this form of tourism (Buckley, 2001). One can all the same, draw up a non-exhaustive list of the effectshypotheticals of ecotourism, both positive and negative, in economic, socio-cultural and environmental level. These are summarized in Table 2 and some aspects related to them. related will be discussed in more detail later.

Tourism is often seen as responsible for the degradation of the natural environment, at least in part (Lequin, 2001). Measuring the ecological costs and benefits of projects tourism thus constitutes one of the major challenges of ecotourism. Indeed, ecotourism represents one of the few forms of tourism development which, under certain conditions, can promote the protection of natural areas through to the conservation programs that it instigates and that it can finance (UNWTO and UNEP, 2002).

1.8: Ecotourism research

Ecotourism research is still in its infancy, with less than twenty years behind it. One of the first consequences of this relative youth translates into the absence of a strong theoretical framework, thus forcing researchers to draw on other disciplines, both in science social than in the natural sciences (Ross and Wall, 1999; Fennell, 2001; Bachman and Morais, 2001). Fennell (2001) adds: “The intriguing thing about ecotourism is that it bridges between the realm of the social sciences and that of the sciences natural. Although it is very exciting, it presents itself also as a challenge, that of finding common ground in order to give meaning and direction to this new field of research⁸”. Oftentimes, researchers do only a fewMoreis, 2001). It is also common for these to attach to this destination and will thus collect and interpret data on a rather subjective basis (Backman and Morais, 2001). We understands then that it is necessary to approach any work of land in ecotourism with some caution. Using a qualitative approach can be very helpful in within this research field due to the lack of knowledge and the need to understand the meaning of the phenomenon, which does not obey the theories developed under the banner ofmass tourism. However, many of the qualitative studie in ecotourism are characterized by a methodology deficient (Bachman and Morais, 2001). As is the case in other fields, ecotourism research would benefit from cross, within the framework of the same study, methods quantitative and qualitative

With the tourism industry propelled into a leading position in term of economic benefits at the international level and the awakening of the world population to the importance of respecting and conserving the natural environment, ecotourism has seen its popularity grow phenomenally since the late 1980s.

Despite its relative youth, ecotourism has conquered in a short time of time and the heart and head of many governments, NGOs, communities, tourism stakeholders and researchers. Againrightly or wrongly perceived as a panacea to the problems of sustainable development in

the natural environment and in isolated regions, however, true ecotourism is very difficult to find.

This form of tourism too often borrows the appearance of nature-based or adventure tourism, thus dropping the basic principles, which are essential traits of his personality.

Having become a very powerful marketing tool, ecotourism as well drowned among other tourism projects with a lower “value added” is losing its usefulness as an alternative tool for development.

1.9: Conclusion:

Ecotourism is a dream. The traveler sees himself immersed in a lush jungle in the heart of a protected area home to rare and colorful species. The community is taken over possession of its traditions and finally control its future. The government gets a portion of the profits financial while responding to its deep desire to adhere to the principles of sustainable development. So that these dreams become a reality, it will be necessary to intensify the efforts of consultation and research in order to dispel the thick fog in which still bathes ecotourism. Despite doubts and discounts in questions that are shaking up this area of research today, ecotourism remains a rich avenue to explore in order to reconcile the socio-economic development of our societies and the Environmental Protection.

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