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# Book review: Ecotourism and environmental sustainability: principles and practice

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## **Book review**

### **Ecotourism and Environmental Sustainability: Principles and Practice**

Jennifer Hill and Tim Gale (Editors)

ISBN 978-0-7546-7262-3, Ashgate, 2009

This book arises from contributions to the Royal Geographical Society Annual International Conference in 2006 and aims to examine “critically the ambivalence that lies behind the concept of ecotourism as synonymous with environmentally sustainable tourism” (p. xvii). The book is structured in three parts: Part 1 consists of three chapters and addresses the context of ecotourism and environmental sustainability; Part 2 consists of nine chapters and provides a geographical spread of case studies, interestingly without European representation; and Part 3 addresses the future for ecotourism and environmental sustainability. *Ecotourism and Environmental Sustainability* highlights some of the challenges and contradictions of the concept of ecotourism and raises important questions for both tourism academics and practitioners about the validity of the concept given the demonstrated gap between theory and practice. Indeed, the book is in itself an example of the contradictions and issues which have led to the point where the concept of ecotourism as a positive notion has lost much credibility. Gale and Hill in their introductory Chapter 1 highlight the failure of academics to agree on a robust definition of ecotourism which has arguably contributed to practitioners and marketers being able to exploit the term and its positive public perception. This has ultimately resulted in a situation where the application of the term ecotourism, and its derivatives, in practice have become far removed from restrictive definitions of ecotourism with its clearly defined components ‘nature based’, ‘conservation supporting’, ‘environmentally educated’ and ‘sustainably managed’ (e.g. Buckley 1994). Indeed, the ‘ecotour’ label for activities as diverse as those of an airport transfer business or examples highlighted by Evans in his Chapter on tiger tourism in India, provide the basis for Simpson’s argument for the abolishment of the term in Chapter 13. Yet, despite identifying the fundamental problems arising from the failure of agreement on a definition of ecotourism, the editors do not commit to defining what their definition is for the term ecotourism as a baseline for this volume. Not surprisingly then, the variety of authors apply the term very loosely, representing a wide spectrum from restrictive right through to broadly interchangeable with nature-based tourism. As such the book represents the current situation and its flaws and in doing so undermines its opportunities to provide a credible way forward. It also reflects the book’s origin as a collation of conference papers, thus representing a diversity of academic interpretations of the concept of ecotourism.

In the introductory chapter, the editors explore the meaning and significance of the concept of ecotourism, its evolution and the continuing academic debate regarding its definition and merits. Their analysis of the British Broadcasting Corporation’s ‘50 things to do before you die’ indicates that the editors’ interpretation of ecotourism is inclusive rather than restrictive, largely equating to nature-based tourism. The editors

and various contributors throughout the book draw attention to the loose use of the 'eco' prefix in tourism practice and highlight the theory-practice divide. However, their outright rejection of the sustainability-ecotourism link is based on observation of the current application of the term in tourism practice and inclusive definitions of ecotourism. Thus while Gale and Hill argue that ecotourism can never be environmentally sustainable, one might argue that it wouldn't be ecotourism in the first place if it wasn't.

Indeed, the book and this chapter not only highlight but also demonstrate some of the contradictions of the ecotourism debate. For example, Gale and Hill's chapter aptly acknowledges that "there is a tendency to overstate its [ecotourism's] significance..., when in fact it constitutes only a small proportion of global tourism" (p. 4). Yet, while enthusiastic statements about being the fastest growing sector of tourism have shifted from ecotourism to nature-based tourism, they continue to surface even throughout this volume and are rarely backed up by data and clear definitions of the terms. The generous inclusion as ecotourism in tourism practice and literature of any activity with a nature based component has watered down the concept to a point where indeed valid questions are being asked about the relevance of the term. Indeed, without an agreed definition of ecotourism, and considering how loosely the term is used in practice and even theoretical discussions, one has to wonder of the relevance or validity of the overarching question posed at the outset of this volume: whether ecotourism is synonymous with environmental sustainability.

In Chapter 2, Holden examines the tourism-environment relationship, highlighting that this relationship is based on cultural constructs reflecting the values attached to nature. He examines some of the effects of the productivist world-view whereby nature is seen as a resource to be managed and used to produce largely economic values, including through tourism. He explores environmental ethics and the philosophical standpoints of the human-environment relationship, from the view of human domination based on Descartes' separation of human and non-human worlds, through to Moore's God inspired nature and more recent moves towards assigning rights to all components of nature, not just humans. Thus Holden demonstrates that social constructs with respect to nature are not static and he highlights the paradigm shift in tourism from the instrumental use of nature, to sustainability based on conservation, and predicts a potential shift towards an increasing recognition of a spiritual connection with our surroundings. Are we finally starting to understand the perspectives of indigenous peoples around the world?

In Chapter 3, Hunter discusses the use of ecological footprint (EF) analysis as a tool for assessing and comparing the sustainability of tourism activities. This chapter draws heavily on data published in Hunter and Shaw (2006). It highlights in particular the importance of considering the complete journey, including long-haul travel, and not just impacts in the local destination context. Nevertheless, current analysis occurs at the broad scale of countries and is dominated by assessment of the travel component with only a rudimentary proxy for the destination area EF. This reflects the challenge of obtaining destination specific data and may be a sign of the newness of the methodological approach but is a shortcoming that needs to be addressed in the coming years.

Chapter 4 examines landscape changes related to adventure (not eco) tourism activities. Byers provides two interesting examples of the direct and indirect impacts of tourism activities on the environment in which it operates and raises some interesting issues regarding community capacity and development approaches. However, considering the ecotourism theme of the book, this chapter hovers on the fringe of its scope and contributes to further the inclusive rather than restrictive use of the term ecotourism.

In Chapter 5, Li provides a positive case study of tourism development in a rural destination of China. Though shying away from ever using the term ecotourism, this case study provides arguably the best example of ecotourism amongst the case studies, given the destination's natural attraction base (a Biosphere Reserve) and the direct engagement of the local community by means of a joint-stock company to achieve conservation outcomes through sustainable management.

In Chapter 6, Stewart and Draper discuss cruise tourism activities in Arctic Canada in the context of environmental sustainability and highlight the need for better integration and broadening of management approaches. Once again, the 'eco' prefix largely results from the activities' nature based destination, though the authors do mention an educational component to the tourism product.

Chapter 7 by DeBruyn and Smith introduces readers to bear viewing, an activity rapidly gaining in popularity as part of a broader population shift from extractive activities such as hunting to the more passive activity of wildlife viewing. The authors take a highly prescriptive approach to addressing local management issues.

Chapter 8 by Evans provides a refreshing change in writing style through its narrative approach. It fittingly illustrates the application of the 'eco' prefix in tourism practice to exploit people's positive perception of the ecotourism concept without any regard to the theoretical basis of the concept. It also highlights the failure of conservation focussed approaches to acknowledge local people as an intricate part of the system that cannot simply be excluded and ignored thereafter. Using the example of India's tiger reserves, Evans poignantly points out the existing fractures between the conservation and tourism sectors, and vast gaps between marketing promises and the unpredictable realities of engaging with wildlife, important factors to be overcome in the quest for local sustainability.

In Chapter 9, Burns calls for a shift away from reactive management based on fear of liability and politics towards a recognition that tourists visiting natural settings inherently expose themselves to certain risks. As such she calls for recognition that visitors to natural areas make a choice to expose themselves to the risks inherent in nature-based activities and settings and thus are responsible for their welfare. Similarly, managers should recognise that people are a part, not apart, of these natural systems and need to be included as an integral component in management considerations.

Chapters 10 and 11 examine the role of varying approaches to communication with visitors and the benefits of interpretation to tourist attitudes with regards to conservation, while chapter 12 argues the case for the consideration of botanic gardens as destinations for ecotourism. Again, the terms of nature-based tourism and

ecotourism are being used interchangeably to the detriment of the aims of this volume.

In Chapter 13, Simpson builds the somewhat provocative case for abandoning the concept of ecotourism. I find the placement of this chapter somewhat curious, as it derides the concept that the variety of case studies in part 2 were aimed to illustrate. Would it not have been better placed in part 1 to stimulate a critical evaluation of the subsequent case studies? In his attempts to bring the concept of ecotourism into question by illustrating the gap between practical realities and theory, Simpson on a couple of occasions misses the point. For example while on one hand outlining Honey's (1999) restrictive criteria for ecotourism, he repeats the argument by Gale and Hill in Chapter 1 and asks "if ecotourism does not build environmental awareness or respect local culture" and the other criteria, "should [we] be undertaking this type of tourism after all?" (p. 227). Well, if it doesn't fulfil the criteria, it ain't ecotourism in the first place. Which brings me back to my main issue with this book: without a clear definition of the parameters and components of 'ecotourism' and 'sustainability' to provide the context and boundaries for the use of these terms in this book, any discussion of the validity of the concepts lacks merit and provides limited scope for theoretical advancement. The book nevertheless provides an array of interesting case studies of nature based tourism activities and through their diversity highlights the exploitation of, and ongoing debate surrounding, the concepts of ecotourism and sustainability in tourism practice and academic discourse.

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