

Defining Ecotourism

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Introduction

Ecotourism is one of those terms that have been a bit more than 20 years around and nobody has been able to define yet. Simmons (1999, p. 2) mentions the definitional challenge as described by Ziffer (1989):

The term has eluded firm definition because it is a complex notion which ambitiously attempts to describe an activity, set forth a philosophy and espouse a model of development.

It seems that everybody who gets in touch with the concept accepts the challenge to define ecotourism at last. Mader mentions a comparative study of ecotourism in the Americas where the authors found "that of the 25 government tourism agencies that chose to define "ecotourism," 21 chose to create their own definition"!

It is not only governments that have tried to tackle the challenge of defining ecotourism it has also been academics, commercial tour operators, conservation organisations, and development nongovernmental organisations. People tend to define things in terms that are beneficial to themselves, hence the variety of definitions (Merg, 1999). There are however several commonly used definitions around the world. Let us explore some of them and identify their main elements. It is responsible to provide a "rainbow" of proposed definitions for ecotourism and not only a one-sided version of what ecotourism is and should be.

Definitions

We will start with the definition stated by Ceballos-Lascurain, who is generally accepted as the first person to define ecotourism:

Tourism that involves traveling to relatively undisturbed or uncontaminated areas with the specific objective of studying, admiring, and enjoying the scenery and its wild plants and animals, as well as any existing cultural manifestations (both past and present) found in these areas (Ceballos-Lascurain, 1991, p.25).

The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) defines ecotourism as:

Responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people.

The Green Globe 21 International Ecotourism Standard has adopted Ecotourism Australia's definition of ecotourism:

Ecologically sustainable tourism with a primary focus on experiencing natural areas that fosters environmental and cultural understanding, appreciation and conservation.

Merg (1999) mentions that since the publication of Martha Honey's book "Ecotourism and Sustainable Development" has made her definition an accepted standard. Martha Honey presents her definition as:

Ecotourism is travel to fragile, pristine, and usually protected areas that strive to be low impact and (usually) small scale. It helps educate the traveler; provides funds for conservation; directly benefits the economic development and political empowerment of local communities; and fosters respect for different cultures and for human rights (Honey, 1999, p. 25)

Fennell after reviewing 15 definitions of ecotourism provides his own definition:

Ecotourism is a sustainable form of natural resource-based tourism that focuses primarily on experiencing and learning about nature, and which is ethically managed to be low-impact, non-consumptive, and locally oriented (control, benefits, and scale). It typically occurs in natural areas, and should contribute to the conservation or preservation of such areas (Fennell, 1999, p. 43).

Fennell (1999) identified 13 main principles in the definitions he analysed. The variables are ranked by frequency of response:

- Interest in nature
- Contributes to conservation
- Reliance on parks and protected areas
- Benefits local people/long-term benefits
- Education and study
- Low impact/non-consumptive
- Ethics/responsibility
- Management
- Sustainable
- Enjoyment and appreciation
- Culture
- Adventure
- Small scale

If we compare this main principles with the ones identified by Martha Honey (1999):

- Involves travel to natural destinations
- Minimizes impacts
- Builds environmental awareness
- Provides direct financial benefits for conservation
- Provides financial benefits and empowerment for local people
- Respects local culture
- Supports human rights and democratic movements

We can see an overlapping similarity in Fennell's and Honey's work except in the "supports human rights and democratic movements". Clearly all these principles are a tall order to fill for anyone claiming to run an "ecotourism" enterprise and it is highly doubtful that any one project or operator can claim to meet all these criteria. However it does give a base of ideas to work from when looking into whether or not something is or isn't "Ecotourism". Most operations which can truly be called ecotourism should be striving to meet as many of these criteria as possible (Merg, 1999).

Compared to these all encompassing definitions we can find simpler definitions of what ecotourism should be. Shores (1992) goes to the extreme of saying:

The proper definition of ecotourism is ecologically sound tourism. It really is that simple.

He then complements by proposing a continuum from “relative ecotourism” to “absolute ecotourism”.

The overall or net effect of the tourism experience can be environmentally sound -- relative ecotourism, or every component and sub-component in the tourism web can be environmentally sound -- absolute ecotourism.

Conclusion

We have shown some of the most common definitions used by academics, practitioners and ecotourism organisations around the world and then identified the common variables or principles of all-encompassing definitions. Finally we presented the proposed continuum or spectrum of what ecotourism can be as mentioned by Shores.

This article can be useful to the tourism student as a simple introduction to the complexity and importance of defining what ecotourism is. It is also an important read for potential “EcoTravellers” to be clear of what is “genuine ecotourism” and “ecotourism lite”.

“genuine ecotourism, toward putting into practice the multiple principles of ecotourism, often within a single project, tour company, or park, and the other ecotourism lite, toward adopting only its façade, without making fundamental changes to mass tourism practices” (Honey, 1999, p. 21).

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