

Defining Responsible Tourism

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Introduction

The images of tourism and traveling around the world are of beautiful beaches, native rainforests, smiling locals, clear skies, sunny days and hundreds more images you can come up with. These are the images the tourism companies and tourism boards of countries show us to attract our money. Many times these images are a reality, but just inside the tourist enclaves these companies and boards have created. Outside the walls the reality is another one, and that is many times kept away from our sight. Our “responsibility” as tourists could be to look above those walls and hence become the travelers we want to be, to explore the reality of the places we have decided to visit.

It is difficult for a tourist to be conscious of the negative impacts one can have on the destination visited. The whole tourism experience in hotels and tours is in a way designed to separate us from the natural, social, cultural and economic contexts. On the natural context we do not see where the waste we generate goes to, where does the water of the pools we use come from, how is the electricity for air conditioning generated, what is the amount of pollution our airplane produces. On the social side sometimes we do not even cross steps with the “locals”. Only as a customer – employee relationship, were the locals are employed to clean the rooms, cook the food and serve the drinks. Talking about the cultural context we sometimes buy the local handicrafts and are presented with “cultural” shows. We never meet the producers and never have the reassurance that our money went straight to the producer instead of all the intermediaries. This is related to the economic context and its relationship with tourism.

In response to this reality of negative impact of tourism in the destination tourists have become aware of this and want something different. Also tourism companies are becoming aware that not taking care of the environment, supporting the local communities, respecting the host culture and benefiting the local economy is bad business in the long term. “Responsible Tourism” is a recent buzzword that is permeating the tourism sector. Travelers are demanding authentic experiences, direct contact with the local communities, environmentally friendly tours and accommodation. Travelers want to be responsible travelers. In response to this demand companies are understanding, at last, that they must be truly responsible on the above mentioned contexts of the destinations they work in.

Finding a Definition

Responsible Tourism is a concept closely related to the idea of ecotourism. It is from this latter concept that we can draw conclusions for a possible definition of “responsible tourism”. 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.

According to this definition ecotourism is responsible travel having in mind several aspects of our travel. Fennell (1999) identified the main principles of thirteen ecotourism definitions he analyzed. The principles that relate to responsible tourism are:

- Contributes to conservation
- Benefits local people/long-term benefits

- Low impact/non-consumptive
- Ethics/responsibility
- Sustainable
- Culture
- Small scale

If we compare this main principles with the ones identified by Martha Honey (1999) which again relate to responsible tourism we can mention:

- 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

The main spheres covered by these principles are the same we have mentioned before and which are mentioned in most tourism literature related to tourism impacts:

- Destination Ecosystems (Natural)
- Local Communities (Social and Cultural)
- Economic Benefits (Economic)
- Democratic Movements, as extended by Martha Honey (Political)

Now it is possible to suggest a definition of Responsible Tourism:

Travel that takes into consideration the natural, socio-cultural, economic and political contexts of a destination in the search to increase benefits and minimize negative impacts.

Who must advocate and practice responsible tourism?

Responsible tourism must be advocated by travelers and sought out by tourism enterprises. I have found a number of websites related to responsible tourism, or the ethics of traveling. Some are guidelines for tourism companies, mainly tour operators, of what they must do to be responsible. Others focus on travelers. Most are do's and don'ts lists for travelers to follow when visiting a destination. Others suggest things to think about to be a responsible tourist. Most are focused on the proper behavior in a destination.

For tourism companies the Association of Independent Tour Operators (AITO) has a simple set of guidelines which include:

- **Protect the Environment** – its flora, fauna and landscapes
- **Respect local cultures** – traditions, religions and built heritage
- **Benefit local communities** – both economically and socially
- **Conserve natural resources** – from office to destination
- **Minimise pollution** – through noise, waste disposal and congestion

The Pacific Asia Travel Association (PATA) has a much more comprehensive code, which is too long to write here but can be seen in their website (see References).

How can we be “responsible travellers”?

To be responsible travellers we can read do's and don'ts lists like the one proposed by “Project Ecotourism” (see References). The problem is that the list is long and to be comprehensive we

would have to include more questions or guidelines from other sources like ResponsibleTravel.com (see References).

Ecoturismolatino.com thinks these lists or codes' approach to foster or understand responsible tourism is not very useful. Ecoturismolatino wants to promote a responsible tourism but does not think it is helpful to just propose guidelines of proper behavior. There will always be something missing. What a traveller must think to become a true EcoTraveller (eco comes from the Greek oikos which means house) is to see the world as its home and behave as we expect other people to behave at our house. An EcoTraveller is a traveler of her/his oikos.

To be an EcoTraveller is to have a "responsible" mindset. When traveling in this world and aiming to be responsible the EcoTraveller must think in three dimensions: regions, stages and contexts. What do I mean by these? Leiper (1995) says that tourism can be understood by the movement of people through three geographical *regions* (first dimension): (1) generating regions (places where the tourist comes from), (2) transit route regions (where people cross to arrive to their destination) and (3) destination regions (where the tourist is heading to). When I talk about stages (second dimension) it is the travel *stages* we all experience before, during and after our travels. Butler (1980) talks about five stages: the anticipation, travel to site, on-site experience, travel home, and recollection. Finally the third dimension is *context*. By contexts I refer to the social, cultural, natural, economic, and political mentioned in our definition of responsible tourism. Relating the dimension of stages with the dimension of regions mentioned before we can say that a person anticipates his/her travels in the generating region, travels to and back through the transit route regions, experiences in the destination region and recollects in the generating region. The EcoTraveller must also think about the contexts that are present in the three geographical regions mentioned by Leiper (1995).

In conclusion to become a true and responsible EcoTraveller a person must constantly and consciously think about the various contexts of the tourism regions while experiencing their travel stages. We must aim to reduce our negative impacts and increase the benefits on the contexts of the diverse regions we experience during our travels. To practice responsible tourism you must have the belief that when you respect other peoples' homes you are respecting your home, your world, and your oikos.

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