



Ecotourism Concepts, Principles, and Applications

by Bryan Wilson; ecotourism marketing consultant; partner, Leave Home Productions; email bryan@leave-home.com

This article describes ecotourism and the way it differs from other forms of specialty travel, and addresses the debate about the purity of ecotourism principles. This material is based partly upon coursework and readings in ecotourism planning and management that I have done at Humboldt State University's Institute for Ecological Tourism, taught by Professor Michael Sweeney.

Some definitions

“Ecotourism”: “Responsible travel to natural areas, which conserves the environment and improves the welfare of local people.”—The International Ecotourism Society

“Sustainable”: Sustainability requires that mankind live within the real limits imposed by the natural resources to which we are connected, in a way that will not negate other species' and future generations' ability to meet their needs.

“Ecotourism” ≠ “Adventure Travel”

Ecotourism is distinct from other forms of specialty travel, including adventure travel, in that it is not only a definition of a set of activities, but is a set of principles related to responsible tourism, a means toward educating tourists about conservation, and an ideal related to changing man's way of being in society and his impact upon the natural environment. It has grown and coincided with a growing dissatisfaction among many members of industrially developed societies with mass tourism and consumerism, and their desire for leisure activities which are fulfilling and furthering of their personal development.

Ecotourism concerns the education of the tourist through the primary method of direct experience with the natural world, where the tourist approaches and is guided with a sense of humility, and where physical activity and accommodations or other services are only facilitating factors of this educational experience. This is distinct from what are called adventure travel and nature travel. Other forms of travel, like cultural or heritage tourism, share some features and activities with ecotourism, but might not include education about natural conservation or be based upon a proper respect and equitable working relationship with the host communities, nor might they be ecologically sensitive. An ecotour should be developed in a way that the host community benefits and is an active and engaged partner in the development process. In this, ecotourism represents a model for development and even incorporates new paradigms for decision making by seeking to engage community members in this process, which would often otherwise bypass them. Finally, ecotourism has an expectation of reduction of impacts and accrual of net benefits for the natural environment and host

communities, and as such is meant to be designed and financially supported in a way that is economically and ecologically sustainable.

Principles and applications

There is considerable debate about the utility of maintaining a purist perspective about the meaning of ecotourism—whether it is more useful as a guiding concept or a set of strict criteria. There are very few people who live or operate a business in a manner that is truly sustainable, but a responsible manner of living requires that we continue in a sincere effort toward repairing damage, and building social and biological health in whatever areas we inhabit or visit. In that light, it seems to me that the concepts of ecotourism can be of best utility if used as vehicles on the path toward ecologically sound actions, with the recognition that a purist approach may deter some from ever starting on that path. There is a dynamic balance between making gains and improvements by allowing for the sometimes imperfect application of these principles and the need to maintain the integrity of the concepts. Stating this is not the same as accepting greenwashing by ceding the term “ecotourism” for use by irresponsible tourism ventures. Of course, it is the results on the ground that matter!

As we put these principles into practice in a world fraught with economic and political pressures, it is helpful to keep in mind several other principles, borrowed from the permaculture movement: start small, leave pristine environments alone, create diverse systems, and return surpluses to the systems from which they came. Starting small means making only small mistakes (and we will all make mistakes!) and having time to learn from them. Leaving pristine environments alone means only developing tourist infrastructure in areas that are already touched or compromised by human inhabitation. Ecotourism can support the rehabilitation of damaged lands—there are enough beautiful, but damaged, places and cultures which need care that we do not need to be extending tourism infrastructure or encouraging visitation into the most fragile areas (including space tourism). Creating diverse systems implies for tourism that we not rely upon one approach, one organization, or one actor to work, but trying several approaches. It also reminds us that even ecotourism should only remain one livelihood source within a community and that it should not displace traditional livelihoods or functions within natural systems. Returning surpluses to the systems from which they came mean tourism shouldn't be an extractive industry—tourism should help build social and natural resources within the host communities and ecosystems, rather than export them all to economic centers in exchange for low service sector wages.

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