

# Ethically Responsible Leisure? Promoting Social and Environmental Justice through Ecotourism

**Steve Vanderheiden**

Department of Political Science, University of Colorado at Boulder, Ketchum  
106, 333 UCB, Boulder, CO 80309-0333; vanderson@colorado.edu

**Melanie Sisson**

\*AUTHOR: INSTITUTIONAL AFFILIATION, MAILING ADDRESS,  
EMAIL\*

*Ecotourism has been lauded as a potentially effective means for raising revenue for nature conservation, and certification schemes likewise promise to help to “sustain the well-being of local people” in ecotourist destinations. In this paper, we consider the social and environmental justice dimensions of ecotourism through the certification schemes that define the industry, treating the desire to engage in ethically responsible travel as a necessary but insufficient condition for bringing about these desired ends, and one that requires accurate and trustworthy information in order to effectively realize ecotourism’s potential to engage normative concerns through leisure activities.*

To what extent can ecotourism deliver upon its promises to advance imperatives of social and environmental justice? Such ends are often associated with ecotourism by its advocates, along with conventional objectives like habitat conservation and environmental sustainability. The U.K.-based Pro-Poor Tourism Partnership, for example, claims that tourism is “particularly relevant to poverty reduction and to achieving the Millennium Development Goals” in that it offers unique development opportunities for the world’s poor, and ecotourism specifically appears capable of advancing anti-poverty and human development goals in that “tourists are often attracted to remote areas because of their comparative advantage in terms of high cultural, wildlife and landscape values. As these may have few other development options, the poverty-reduction value of these tourism opportunities is high” (Pro-Poor Tourism 2004). As a market segment that is growing three times faster than the tourism industry as a whole (TIES 2006), this potential for advancing social justice objectives partially motivated the United Nations to declare 2002 as the International Year of Ecotourism, raising public awareness about

ecotourism and its potential social benefits as well as initiating processes of comprehensively assessing its impacts.

Ecotourism might thus be regarded as a subset of “responsible tourism,” which is held by the Kerala Declaration on Responsible Tourism (2008) to require “the economic participation of local people as direct owners in the business of tourism not just as beneficiaries of charity” and to “contribute to socio-economic development by supporting the conservation of natural and cultural heritage.” This focus upon local beneficiaries of tourist development and travel follows the World Tourism Organization’s Global Code of Ethics, which calls upon tourism to “promote human rights and, more particularly, the individual rights of the most vulnerable groups,” which it can accomplish by ensuring that local peoples associated with tourism “share equitably in the economic, social and cultural benefits they generate, and particularly in the creation of direct and indirect jobs resulting from them” (Articles 2, 5). Ecotourism, according to the WTO’s Code, is “particularly conducive to enriching and enhancing the standing of tourism, provided they respect the natural heritage and local populations and are in keeping with the carrying capacity of the sites” (Article 3). As a variety of nature-based tourism, in which destinations sought out by tourists are selected on the basis of their proximity to exotic or otherwise unique ecosystems or access to natural scenery or wildlife, ecotourism is regarded as combining these concerns for social and environmental responsibility with its focus on natural sites, most of which are located in the developing world. This conjoining of “responsible” and “nature-based” tourism explains why The International Ecotourism Society defines ecotourism as “responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people” (TIES 2006).

Critics, however, have dismissed ecotourism on grounds that it not only fails to live up to these lofty aspirations, but also that many so-called ecotourist sites or products amount to little more than another form of “greenwashing” or efforts to commodify nature in the same manner as similarly ineffective forms of green consumerism. The first variety of critique is largely empirical and based in case studies of ecotourism products and destinations, and need not necessarily impugn the potential for ecotourism to advance the objectives mentioned above, even if it does temper the enthusiasm with which this potential is viewed. The problem may not lie within the concept of ecotourism as such, but rather in the implementation of its various aspirations through codes of ethics, industry standards, or certification schemes. The second aims directly at impugning the idea of ecotourism, either by associating it with disreputable marketing strategies that appeal to consumers’ desires to enact their preferences for social justice or environmental sustainability through their purchasing choices but do so misleadingly and so fail to deliver the promised outcomes, or by attaching it to a Frankfurt School critique of green consumerism itself, which dismisses all efforts at social or environmental reform through consumer behaviour as crass and wrongheaded. But this form of critique typically relies

upon the empirical premise that such efforts cannot really yield their claimed social or environmental benefits, and so may likewise be contingent upon standards or certification schemes failing to deliver the promised goods. Either way, the question of whether or not ecotourism does or might promote these objectives warrants further examination, and the viability and efficacy of transparent performance standards requires further consideration. \*AUTHOR: ED. ADDED "REQUIRES" TO PREV. SENTENCE; PLEASE VERIFY ORIGINAL MEANING HAS BEEN RETAINED\*

### **Promoting Social and Environmental Justice**

In describing the potential benefits of ecotourism, we have identified a justice imperative as among the objectives identified by advocates and to be considered here, but what do social and environmental justice mean? We take social justice to be concerned with the equitable distribution of human goods and bads, including but not limited to economic resources (income and wealth, access to employment, etc.) that have conventionally been associated with scholarly work on distributive justice. These goods also include political power, recognition, access to the public goods that are produced through social cooperation, and what Rawls calls "the social bases of self-respect" (1971, 544). But social justice as we understand it is also centrally concerned with the distribution of social bads, generating the imperative to minimize but also equitably allocate exposure to such undesirable social byproducts as risk from environmental hazards and impacts from blight or crime, and generally to ensure that obstacles to human flourishing aren't concentrated among disadvantaged groups, thereby compounding their disadvantage. In this sense, we take environmental justice to be a subset of social justice, which focuses on access to environmental amenities like recreational spaces or clean air and water as well as exposure to environmental hazards like those associated with pollution or hazardous waste. The latter has been the primary focus of environmental justice social movements in the United States (Schlosberg 2002), but we understand the imperative of environmental justice as also being concerned with the distribution of goods—which are often the flip side of bads, as clean air is merely the absence of airborne pollution—and environmental injustice to arise when these are concentrated among society's advantaged such that they compound disadvantage in the same way that inequitable exposure to hazards has done.

Ecotourism thus has at least the potential to promote environmental justice as well as non-environmental aspects of social justice in several ways. If it can become a reliable source of employment and revenue to serve the human development interests of local peoples residing near ecotourist destinations, it can thereby serve the social justice imperatives identified by those defining ecotourism in such terms. There are, to be sure, several important critiques and caveats by which to qualify this aspiration, and these shall be examined briefly below, but for now simply note the causal connection between ecotourism as

a development mechanism and its potential for addressing core social justice imperatives. Imperatives of environmental justice can potentially be served in several ways, as is suggested by the association between ecotourism and sustainability. Most obviously, to the extent that ecotourism can provide a viable and durable means of support for local peoples residing in ecologically sensitive areas, it might enable the protection of local environments as components of the ecotourism economy against threats from extractive industries, as conservation generates revenue that can help to ward off environmentally destructive forms of development. Compared with mass tourism, the smaller scale and ethic of minimal-impact travel (an ethic that is not always followed in practice) can also potentially serve such conservation interests, preventing the conversion of an environmental amenity into blight or hazards. Less directly, ecotourism can create new stakeholders in the protection of ecotourism lands and resources among past and would-be visitors to those areas, promoting protection and generating further revenue streams from afar. Finally, the human development interests served by ecotourism might potentially empower local peoples to become more sophisticated and effective advocates for conservation, as newly engaged stakeholders in transnational political economy rather than mere victims of its structural forces.

We take the connections between environmental sustainability and social justice that were established in the Brundtland Report (WCED 1987) to be foundational to ecotourism's mission of redressing poverty and empowering indigenous peoples while protecting ecosystems and maintaining their resource stocks for local residents and future generations. Of course, these potential benefits and the causal linkages between them must be viewed with some scepticism based in historical experience with other "development" proposals, grounded in a realistically modest appraisal of political possibility, and subjected to empirical study rather than uncritically accepted. Various predictable obstacles can undermine these potential benefits from obtaining, and the empirical case study evidence of ecotourism programs and destinations should give pause to those touting ecotourism as a panacea for either the places or people that surround its current and potential destinations. But neither should this potential for advancing various social and environmental justice imperatives be dismissed on the basis of sheer cynicism or empirical evidence that shows shortcomings in realizing them in practice, at least where these objectives might be more effectively advanced through better implementation or improved information and monitoring. Since our interest here lies in the potential for ecotourism to advance several justice objectives, rather than in its demonstrated past performance in doing so, our examination shall focus on what we take to be the primary obstacles to realizing ecotourism's promise rather than upon point-by-point replies to the concept's critics. Nonetheless, we consider several critical perspectives on ecotourism's justice and sustainability potential next, in order to establish the basis for our recommendation for the development of standards and certification schemes.

### Critical Perspectives on Ecotourism

Perhaps the most obvious criticism that has been levelled against ecotourism's touted benefits is the notion that ecotourism can be environmentally sustainable, at least when this includes the carbon footprint of air travel to ecotourist destinations. As Colin Hunter notes, "any tourism product that relies on air travel, and particularly long-haul air travel, is likely to exert a substantial net demand on natural resource use and contribute to global climate change" (2009, 44). Analysis of the ecological footprints embedded in ecotourism, including air travel to and from destination sites, suggests that this form of tourism is incompatible with strong notions of environmental sustainability (as seen, for example, in the idea of a global fair share carbon footprint, which considers how much carbon each person could annually emit without causing climate change). As Hunter suggests, however, ecotourism probably demands fewer natural resources than "traditional forms of mass tourism," and so might be regarded as more sustainable than many alternatives. While ecotourism might potentially generate new revenue streams and mobilize public concern on behalf of protecting vulnerable ecosystems in some destinations, the local benefits must be considered against the global harm associated with exacerbated climate change when ecotourists travel great distances to engage in their otherwise low-impact travel.

Critics also contest other putative benefits of ecotourism or identify possible downsides to ecotourism development. Jim Butcher, for example, criticizes the commitment expressed by many ecotourism advocates for developing local tourism infrastructures around local residents, who would be paid to remain close to the land and eschew conventional forms of economic or industrial development. Insofar as local residents are denied development opportunities other than those associated with this form of nature tourism, or have "traditional" roles imposed upon them rather than voluntarily undertaking such commitments, ecotourism might bring jobs but undermine autonomy, replicating colonial power relationships between ecotourists and those working in the ecotourism industry set up to serve them. As Butcher rhetorically asks:

Why not offer communities something better than a life close to nature? There is nothing intrinsically positive in encouraging specific groups of people to remain in a traditional relationship to their land. The thrust of development historically has tended to separate people from a direct dependence on their immediate environment, through urbanisation, trade and the development of division of labour. People in the developed world reap many benefits from this legacy (the ability to travel widely for leisure itself being just one). (2005, 117)

In a similar vein, Ken Simpson suggests that ecotourism can objectify, demean, and violate the privacy of local indigenous peoples by featuring them as subjects of interest. As he notes, the "destination culture comes under increasing pressure to behave as visitors expect it to. Pseudo-cultural happenings are then

created purely for the benefit of visitors, and family events such as church services, weddings and even funerals are routinely presented for tourist enjoyment” (2009, 229). While ecotourism admirably promises to educate tourists in local culture, such examples ought to give pause to those viewing the presentation of native cultures to visitors as necessarily non-exploitative or authentic. Clearly, care must be taken in determining *how* local peoples are to be included within ecotourism products and services, as inclusion cannot tenably be regarded as good in itself. Nonetheless, imperatives to include local peoples in the planning and development of ecotourism programs, such as those in the WTO’s Global Code of Ethics, may help to alleviate or avoid some of these concerns, diffusing some of this criticism by trying to take account of indigenous perspectives and accommodate the concerns of local peoples, seeking to avoid the imposition of “development” goals upon peoples that might resist or be adversely affected by them.

But perhaps the most serious criticism issues from empirical case study research that impugns the credibility of claims that ecotourism can advance its objectives of promoting land conservation and social and environmental justice. A brief search of this literature identifies a number of works that provide cause for optimism about ecotourism’s local environmental and social effects (Wunder 2000; Serio-Silva 2006; Leisher, van Beukering, and Scherl 2007; Bascomb and Taylor 2008; Zambrano, Broadbent, and Durhan 2010); but several others sound a note of caution (Barkin 2003; Stronza 2007; Bologna 2008).<sup>1</sup> Although many of these studies demonstrate the value of detailed and in-depth evaluation of specific sites—information that could certainly be of use to prospective travellers—they offer little basis for generalization: there is no uniformity in the definition of ecotourism used, and so in the outcome(s) measured or the methods used to measure them, and case selection often does not meet the standards of control and variation expected of rigorous social science (George and Bennett 2005). Moreover, the economic costs and benefits of an ecotourism venture are consistently measured only in terms of the surrounding community, taking no account of the resources expended prior to use of a given site or of the manner in which the costs and benefits of that use are then distributed (Lee and Jamal 2008).<sup>2</sup> This tendency is particularly troubling for those concerned with understanding ecotourism’s ability to promote not simply natural conservation and economic development, but also environmental and social justice, both locally and globally.

The current body of ecotourism research thus may provide qualified insight into the effects for a given community of particular types of ecotourism

---

1. See also Ananthaswamy (2004). For a thorough examination of the state of ecotourism research see Weaver and Lawton (2007).

2. The global environmental effects of the resources used to support ecotourist travel—transportation of persons, equipment, food, and so forth—are absent from these analyses. For comment on the importance of such expenditures see Zeller (2009).

activities, but it does not come near to providing an adequate basis for inference about the ability of ecotourism as a larger phenomenon to deliver on the great promise its advocates purport it to have. Though as indicated above the sources of this disconnect are multiple, it is unlikely that the generalizability of empirical studies will improve unless preceded by the imposition of definitional uniformity. In other words, the big-tent nature of ecotourism definitions not only creates practical complications for consumers and vendors but, by precluding meaningful measure of the effects of ecotourism activities, it prevents evaluation of ecotourism's theoretical and actual implications for natural conservation, economic development, and environmental and social justice. Before ecotourism can be studied for its empirical effects, it must be specifically identified—defined in terms of substantive criteria and limited to those destinations and operators that meet such criteria—and, as we shall see below, there remains some controversy about which case studies included in ecotourism assessments ought to count as authentic ecotourism sites or operators, and which should not.

### **Ecotourism as Responsible Consumerism**

Would-be ecotourists are presumed to be motivated not only by the desire to experience exotic or threatened natural ecosystems but also by a conservationist ethic to help to protect them and a social justice ethic to benefit those residing near them. Whether or not a given tourist at any particular destination holds those motives in fact is an empirical question, and one that lies beyond the scope of this paper, but the industry standards and code of ethics noted above appeal to them, as do promotional materials touting the ecotourism credentials of various products and services. It therefore seems reasonable to suppose that part of ecotourism's appeal lies in its ability to simultaneously satisfy self-oriented interests in nature-based experiences along with other-regarding concerns for social justice and environmental sustainability. Ecotourism can thus be regarded as a kind of *credence good* in that a substantial component of its value lies in properties that cannot readily be assessed by the consumer, often because this value issues from its extrinsic effects (e.g., its social and environmental impacts) rather than its observable intrinsic properties. As with other credence goods that appeal to similar motives, would-be ecotourists must rely upon information from others in order to assess the value of tourist products marketed as containing those properties and require credible and accessible information in order to realize that value. Comparison to other such goods is therefore suggestive for assessing the prospect and limits of ecotourism's potential in promoting its various objectives.

Perhaps the most successful certification program for a similar credence good involves the Fair Trade label for coffee, through which a recognized and respected third-party standards organization indicates that coffee beans sold at market meet specified minimum criteria, which includes a floor price for growers that is compatible with sustainable production, prepayment

requirements for suppliers, and basic labor and environmental guidelines.<sup>3</sup> Replacing various corporate-controlled and NGO labelling efforts, Fair Trade provides the sort of reliable and standardized information that could now benefit consumers seeking to navigate the multiple and non-standardized claims various ecotourism product and service providers. While critics have called into question the stringency and fairness of Fair Trade standards—floor prices for growers are still low and requirements that workers form cooperatives have met with resistance—the fact that there now exists a uniform standard and credible certification system for verifying the credence good properties of coffee beans provides some assurance to consumers that their desire to advance their social justice and environmental sustainability concerns through their coffee consumption is not being frustrated by deceptive “greenwashing” claims or incomprehensible standards. As Margaret Levi and April Linton write of the responsible consumerism imperative exercised by those purchasing Fair Trade coffee, consumers want to know that their “purchasing power is used to promote moral ends, goals that serve the material interests of others often at a cost (albeit sometimes relatively minor) to the consumer” (2003, 407).

From the perspective of would-be responsible consumers, credible certification schemes like Fair Trade make possible what Kate Soper describes as a fusion between privately-oriented consumer preferences and socially-oriented citizenship values, empowering what she calls the “consumer-citizen” to exercise civic virtue through consumer behaviour (2007). Through ecotourism, responsible consumers might likewise aim to enact their social and environmental values through their travel choices, in effect incorporating the positive social and environmental externalities of travel into their tourist preference sets. From the perspectives of those operating and marketing ecotourism products and services, an industry standard combined with a credible certification scheme would do for tourism what Fair Trade does for coffee. According to Levi and Linton, those marketing Fair Trade coffee explicitly aim to change consumer behaviour “by transforming individual tastes and preferences,” urging the adoption of “the norm that people in prosperous countries should factor global social justice into their buying decisions” (2003, 419). In making ecotourism products and services available to already-responsible consumers but also urging that responsibility upon holiday travellers through marketing and media, those operators whose products and standards meet the relevant standards could urge the empowerment of the “citizen-tourist” in a similar fashion. Because the social and environmental benefits constitute credence goods, both consumers and purveyors of ecotourism products and services would stand to benefit by an effective certification scheme. Of course, operators whose tourism products and services could not meet certification standards would stand to lose by the

---

3. For a complete list of fair trade certification standards from the Fairtrade Labelling Organizations International (FLO), see: <http://www.fairtrade.net/standards.html>.



adoption of such a scheme, and their resistance likely explains the ongoing lack of an ecotourism industry standard.

Interestingly, Levi and Linton find that while some consumers are willing to pay a small premium for the “Fair Trade” label on coffee, they are unwilling to sacrifice quality for it. Beans marketed as Fair Trade must therefore be of a comparable quality to those that appeal to extant consumer tastes, and can only be slightly more expensive than their uncertified alternatives if they are to be economically viable. Responsible consumers do not therefore replace their private and self-oriented aesthetic preferences with civic ones so much as they consider the satisfaction of the latter as a kind of added value. Unlike coffee, where Fair Trade beans are intrinsically similar to those without certification, deriving their added value from credence good properties that are not apparent in the way that consumers experience their beverage and so do not depend on the cultivation of new aesthetic sensibilities, ecotourism offers a qualitatively different experience than does mass tourism. Owing to its smaller scale, emphasis upon education, and inclusion of indigenous peoples among tour operators and support staff, the higher valuation of an ecotourism product or service to someone willing to pay for it could be based on its combination of intrinsic properties that appeal to self-oriented preferences and extrinsic properties that appeal to other-regarding ones. One might surmise that this added value exceeds that of Fair Trade coffee, since ecotourism offers a qualitatively different tourist experience as well as a distinct set of impacts on local environments and people, possibly explaining the rapid growth of ecotourism in recent decades. Moreover, ecotourism involves a direct and active engagement with those residing near ecotourist destinations, as conscientious tourists seeking to advance the social and environmental justice goals associated with ecotourism do not merely passively consume one commodity rather than another. To the extent that they elect to pay for an ecotourism experience rather than a superficially similar one, they must take as part of this experience the effects on local peoples and places of their various choices, which unlike Fair Trade coffee are neither spatially nor temporally distant from the ecotourist. This willingness to pay a premium for other-regarding credence goods in travel destinations and services, however, depends on the credibility of the standards certifying any tourist product or service as meeting the social and environmental criteria of ecotourism.

### **Definitions, Standards, and Certification**

Commentary promoting the putatively beneficial effects of ecotourist activity abounds, with well-known non-governmental and inter-governmental organizations such as The Nature Conservancy, Conservation International, The Center for Responsible Travel, and the United Nations Environment Program, among others, highlighting ecotourism’s potential to protect natural environments and to improve the well-being of local populations. Many of these entities have eagerly proclaimed there to be a rise in the incidence of

ecotourism, and it is safe to say that the perception that ecotourism is growing in popularity has become widespread. This seeming increase in the appeal of ecotourism has been the subject of debate among those who study the tourism industry. At issue is the matter of whether or not there truly is such a thing as an ecotourist—whether, that is, travellers who incorporate an interest in learning about nature and/or a commitment to environmental and/or social justice into their vacation choices. Some have argued against this notion, contending instead that a supply-side dynamic is at work, wherein it is local destination operators that are becoming eco-conscious of their own volition rather than in response to consumer demand (Sharpley 2006). Others, however, have attributed the change to a general increase in tourist awareness of and attentiveness to environmental degradation and its effects on local populations (Perkins and Grace 2009).

Both sides of this divide are appealing, for both seem to express a desire on the part of at least one market actor to behave responsibly toward the environment and justly toward its inhabitants. Yet, another decidedly less attractive possibility exists: the claimed boom in ecotourism is not a boom at all. Rather, it may be the case that what is being interpreted as an increasing consumer and/or supplier commitment to environmental conservation and to the optimization of its locally beneficial effects is little more than a widening of the scope of the activities, sites, and outcomes allowed to fall under the ecotourism rubric. More than twenty five years after the term's initial invocation, consensus has yet to emerge—either in the tourism industry or in the related scholarly literature—as to what it is, precisely, that ecotourism entails (Luck, Kirstges and Ceballos-Lascurain 2003; Donohoe and Needham 2006; Weaver 2007). Indeed, confusion persists over the very objectives that ecotourism is intended to achieve, with different definitions including or excluding and placing more or less weight on such fundamental matters as what is required for the tourist, and what is required of her; whether ecotourism's concern is only environmental, or also social; and whether the mandate is simply to do no harm or whether it is to do good.<sup>4</sup> Although definitional contestation is often readily (and sometimes rightly) dismissed as a semantic parlor game, the failure to arrive at an operational definition of ecotourism in fact has profound practical implications for the environmental and social benefits it is purported to be able to achieve. Most problematically, the absence of such an understanding precludes the development of meaningful certification schemes: feasible, reliable, and substantive standards and measures by which to establish a site's or a vendor's ecotourism credentials.

The purpose of certification is to signal: it is a means through which suppliers can communicate to interested consumers that their good or service operates in a manner consistent with ecotourists' environmental and social

---

4. It is also unclear where the dividing lines lie between ecotourism and other catchphrase travel options, such as “nature tourism” and “sustainable tourism.”

values. Without a clear, workably precise, and pervasive understanding of the objectives of ecotourism, however, certification becomes non-exclusive. That is, because the boundaries of ecotourism are ill-established and expansive, so too are the criteria by which one might reasonably claim to fall within them; so long as an activity, venue, or policy presents itself as being consistent with any one aspect of any one definition, there exists no legitimate basis upon which to prevent it from assuming the ecotourism label. It is therefore not surprising that the industry is replete not only with entities offering ecotourism-certified travel opportunities, but also with entities offering ecotourism certification services. Though some of these are reputable—for example, the partnership among the U.N. Environment Program, the U.N. World Tourism Organization, and the Rainforest Alliance, which in 2008 produced “The Global Sustainable Tourism Criteria”—no one collective has yet become an established authority, and so no one certification mechanism has yet been adopted as an industry standard.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the larger certification organizations operate most heavily and most effectively in such destination countries as Australia, South Africa, and Costa Rica; certification providers in less-developed countries tend to be smaller, more localized, and less reliable—with certification in some cases requiring, for example, only that tour operators pay a fee and complete a by-mail survey.<sup>6</sup>

This certification free-for-all is troubling for well-intentioned consumers and vendors alike, both of whom are vulnerable to outfits that might engage in “greenwashing,” at best exaggerate and at worst invent their ecotourism credentials, most especially in the less-developed countries that have the most to gain, environmentally and socially, from responsible use of their natural endowments. Greenwashing makes it difficult for travellers to ensure that their dollars are being used in the manner and for the purposes intended, while honest vendors suffer the financial consequences of being unable to distinguish themselves from their less-upstanding competitors. These problems are exacerbated by the fact that few certification schemes provide credible data concerning the outcomes of the policies and activities of the ecotourism providers they certify; this sort of information is available almost exclusively in the marketing and scholarly literature in the form of case-study analysis.

Standards and certification are therefore vital to ecotourism’s potential for integrating norms of social justice and environmental sustainability into consumer travel preferences, and the development of such standards has been a priority of the ecotourism industry, if also thus far an elusive goal. According to the Kerala Declaration, “transparent and auditable reporting is essential to the integrity and credibility of our work and to establishing benchmarks and targets which enable individual consumers and businesses to make informed

---

5. Adoption of the Criteria is voluntary—service providers may advertise their use at their own discretion.

6. See, for example, Ecotourism Kenya: <http://www.ecotourism-kenya-ecorating-scheme.php>

choices” (2008). Similarly, the WTO Global Code of Ethics calls upon tourism professionals to “carry out studies of the impact of their development projects on the environment and natural surroundings; they should also deliver, with the greatest transparency and objectivity, information on their future programmes and their foreseeable repercussions and foster dialogue on their contents with the populations concerned” (Article 5). In accordance with such aims, the ecotourism advocacy group Tourism Concern has been working with FLO International (the certification agency for other Fair Trade products) and other ecotourism industry actors to create “a viable certification process with a recognised and trusted logo that applies worldwide, that benefits tourism communities and that, for the first time, gives consumers a meaningful opportunity to promote sustainable empowerment and development, when they go on holiday” (Tourism Concern). The UK-based group currently has an “Ethical Tour Operators’ Group” listing on their website, but there is no review process or listed criteria for operators to join, except for the note: “Tourism Concern is committed to campaigning against exploitation in tourism. It is essential to our independence and integrity that there be no influence or preferential treatment expected or given should an organisation with which we are working be involved in activities against which we are campaigning.” Likewise, the Swedish Ecotourism Society maintains an “Approved Operators” list, but states no criteria for joining it.<sup>7</sup> Presumably, Fair Trade or some other certification for ecotourism products and services would replace the informal and piecemeal means of identifying socially and environmentally responsible tour operators, and with sufficiently strong criteria and adequate monitoring this scheme could address some of the suspicion and remedy some of the shortcomings now associated with existing ecotourism operators.

## **Conclusion**

Ecotourism has been lauded as a potentially effective means for raising revenue and social awareness for nature conservation, and certification schemes likewise promise to help to “sustain the well-being of local people” in ecotourist destinations. If able to realize these aims, ecotourism promises to offer a unique mechanism for promoting social and environmental justice among poor and indigenous peoples residing near ecotourism destinations, though it remains unclear whether or not it can fulfil such promises. For such certification schemes to work, we have suggested, they need to provide credible information to would-be ecotourists concerning the social and environmental impacts and benefits of their tourist expenditures and activities. While we doubt that any form of long-haul tourism can be sustainable, given the carbon costs of air travel and their consequences for global climate, the potential benefits for anti-poverty and human development efforts cannot be ignored, nor can the connection between environmental protection and social justice. We recognize

---

7. <http://www.naturesbestsweden.com/ekoturism/ekoturismforeningen.asp>

the several limits associated with ecotourism as an instrument of environmental sustainability or social justice: that it is likely to remain a niche market activity for affluent consumers and one that is subject to shifting tastes and vulnerable to economic conditions in the developed world as well as policies and stability in the developing world, and that even with certification and monitoring its economic incentive structure and diffused tourist infrastructure make standards ripe for manipulation and abuse. Yet, we find that its potential for activating and mobilizing public concern for threatened places and disadvantaged people and for generating opportunities and revenue streams that could be used to serve crucial justice and sustainability imperatives are too important to be dismissed. Hence, the primary concern for avoiding the pitfalls of greenwashing while maximizing the potential benefits of “citizen-tourist” contributions to these objectives is best served, we argue, by the development and deployment of clear, compelling, and workable standards and certification schemes. We therefore suggest the transparency benefits of informational approaches such as this one might help to realize the considerable potential with which ecotourism has been invested.

But in urging defensible and transparent industry standards for mobilizing the altruistic motives of would-be ecotourists, we also acknowledge the inherent limitations of such standards and emphasize that certification merely assists but cannot replace conscientious and reflective ecotourist choices. Standards and certification may provide the informational starting point for ethically and environmentally responsible travel, but the onus of responsibility for advancing such goals must remain on the tourists, who must take an active interest not only in the accuracy of information about the social and environmental effects of their choices but also in the forms of engagement with local people and places that such information cannot capture. Like certification schemes, the good intentions of a potential ecotourist are prone to corruption, and this corruption may best be avoided by remaining mindful of the goals of social and environmental justice while drawing upon one instrument designed to advance them. Ecotourism must not be reduced to a kind of product to be passively consumed, but must be viewed as a way of experiencing people and places through travel combined with an ongoing concern for them—as an activity rather than a commodity. Only then might ecotourism deliver on the laudable goals that it promises.

#### References:

\*AUTHOR: IN EFFORT TO MAINTAIN INTERNAL CONSISTENCY, ED. ASST. HAS CHANGED ALL FIRST NAMES IN LIST TO FIRST INITIALS. PLEASE VERIFY THAT THIS IS OK, WE CAN ALSO CHANGE ALL INITIALS TO FULL NAMES\*

Ananthaswamy, A. 2004. Massive Growth of Ecotourism Worries Biologists. *New Scientist*. March. <http://www.newscientist.com/article/dn4733-massive-growth-of-ecotourism-worries-biologists.html>

- Ashley, C., H. Goodwin, D. McNab, M. Scott, and L. Chaves, 2006. Making Tourism Count for the Local Economy in the Caribbean. PPT Partnership and the Travel Foundation. Online. [www.propotourism.org.uk/caribbean/caribbean\\_briefs-whole.pdf](http://www.propotourism.org.uk/caribbean/caribbean_briefs-whole.pdf)
- Barkin, D. 2003. Alleviating Poverty Through Ecotourism: Promises and Reality in the Monarch Butterfly Reserve of Mexico. *Environment, Development and Sustainability* 5:371–382.
- Bascomb, B. and M. Taylor. 2008. “Ecotourism and Sustainability in a Q’eqchi’ Maya Community, Guatemala. *FOCUS on Geography* 51 (3): 11–16.
- Bologna, S. A. 2008. Stakeholders and Stickholders: Power and Paradigms in a South African Development Context. *Anthropology Southern Africa*, 31 (3–4): 123–130.
- Buckley, R. 2003. *Case Studies in Ecotourism*. Cambridge, MA: CABI Publishing.
- Butcher, J. 2005. The Moral Authority of Ecotourism: A Critique. *Current Issues in Tourism* 8 (2): 114–124.
- Carter, E., and G. Lowman, eds. 1994. *Ecotourism: A Sustainable Option?* New York: John Wiley and Sons.
- Diamantis, D., 2004. *Ecotourism: Management and Assessment*. London: Thomson Learning.
- Donohoe, H. M., and R. D. Needham, 2006. Ecotourism: The Evolving Contemporary Definition. *Journal of Ecotourism* 5 (3): 192–210.
- George, A. L., and A. Bennett, 2005. *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Hunter, C. 2009. Thinking Globally about Ecotourism Impact. In *Ecotourism and Environmental Sustainability*, eds. J. Hill and T. Gale, 31–48. Burlington, VT: Ashgate.
- The International Ecotourism Society (TIES). 2006. *TIES Global Ecotourism Factsheet*. [www.ecotourism.org](http://www.ecotourism.org)
- Lee, S., and T. Jamal. 2008. Environmental Justice and Environmental Equity in Tourism: Missing Links to Sustainability. *Journal of Ecotourism* 7 (1): 44–67.
- Leisher, C., P. van Beukering, and L.M. Scherl. 2007. Nature’s Investment Bank: How Marine Protected Areas Contribute to Poverty Reduction. The Nature Conservancy.
- Luck, M., T. Kirstges, and H. Ceballos-Lascurain, eds. 2003. *Global Ecotourism Policies and Case Studies*. Clevedon UK: Channel View Publications.
- Levi, M., and A. Linton. 2003. Fair Trade: One Cup at a Time? *Politics and Society* 3 (3): 407–432.
- Perkins, H., and D. A. Grace. 2009. Ecotourism: Supply of Nature or Tourist Demand? *Journal of Ecotourism* 8 (3): 223–236.
- Pro-Poor Tourism Partnership. 2004. Fact Sheet #3: Tourism and Poverty Reduction—Making the Links. [www.propoortourism.org/uk/info\\_sheets/3%20info%20sheet.pdf](http://www.propoortourism.org/uk/info_sheets/3%20info%20sheet.pdf)
- Rawls, J. 1971. *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press.
- Schlosberg, D. 2002. *Environmental Justice and the New Pluralism*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Serio-Silva J. C. 2006. Las Islas do los Changos (the Monkey Islands): The Economic Impact of Ecotourism on the Region of Los Tuxtlas, Veracruz, Mexico. *American Journal of Primatology* 68 (5): 499–506.

- Sharpley, R. 2006. Ecotourism: A Consumption Perspective. *Journal of Ecotourism*, 5 (1): 7–22.
- Simpson, K. 2009. Exploding the Myth of Ecotourism. In *Ecotourism and Environmental Sustainability*, eds. J. Hill and T. Gale, 223–237. Burlington, VT: Ashgate.
- Soper, K. 2007. Rethinking the Good Life: The Citizenship Dimension of Consumer Disaffection with Consumerism. *Journal of Consumer Society* 7 (2): 205–229.
- Stronza, A. 2007. The Economic Promise of Ecotourism for Conservation. *Journal of Ecotourism*, 6 (3): 210–230.
- Tourism Concern International. n.d. Fair Trade in Tourism Network. [www.tourismconcern.org.uk/index.php?page=fairtrade-network](http://www.tourismconcern.org.uk/index.php?page=fairtrade-network)
- Weaver, D. B. 2007. *Ecotourism*, 2nd ed. \*AUTHOR: PUBLISHER CITY\* Australia: John Wiley and Sons Australia, Ltd.
- Weaver, D. B., and L. J. Lawton. 2007. Twenty Years On: The State of Contemporary Ecotourism Research. *Tourism Management* 28:1168–179.
- World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), 1987. *Our Common Future*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Zambrano, A., M. Almeyda, E. N. Broadbent, and W. H. Durham. 2010. Social and Environmental Effects of Ecotourism in the Osa Peninsula of Costa Rica: the Lapa Rios Case. *Journal of Ecotourism* 9 (1): 62–83.
- Zeller, T. 2009. Growth of Eco-Tourism Raises Concerns. *The New York Times*. April 12. <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/04/13/business/global/13iht-green13.html>