

## Chapter 14

### Encouraging reflective visitor experiences in ecotourism

**Jan Packer, Roy Ballantyne**  
University of Queensland

Packer, J. and Ballantyne, R. (2013). Encouraging reflective visitor experiences in ecotourism. In Ballantyne, R. and Packer, J. (Editors). *International Handbook on Ecotourism*. (pp.169-177) Edward Elgar Publishing.

#### Introduction

Reflection has long been recognised as an important, perhaps even necessary component of experiential learning, or learning from doing. It is an integral part of Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle, Revans' (1980; 1982; 1998) process of action learning, and Schon's (1983; 1987) reflective practitioner. Recent research has revealed that it is also an important component of learning in tourism and leisure contexts (Ballantyne, Packer and Falk, 2011; Ballantyne, Packer and Sutherland, 2011). The concept of mindfulness (Langer, 1989; 1997; Moscardo, 2009) has also often been used in these contexts, highlighting the need for visitors to consciously maintain awareness and control over their thoughts and behaviour. This chapter argues that visitor mindfulness is a necessary but not sufficient pre-condition for the kind of learning that changes lives – the kind of learning that ecotourism aims to encourage. It suggests that in order to facilitate meaningful and lasting changes in visitors' environmental behaviours, ecotourism operators need to encourage visitors to intentionally reflect on their experience and its meaning for their lives, and to make concrete and achievable plans for changes they will make in response to their experience. Ideally, they should also find ways to follow up with their visitors, to hold them accountable to their own commitments. This chapter suggests ways in which this might be achieved.

#### Mindfulness theory

The twin concepts of mindfulness and mindlessness have been used in tourism research to explore visitors' responses to the interpretation offered at natural and cultural heritage attractions (Moscardo, 1996; 1999; Moscardo and Pearce, 1986), and more recently, to support a mindfulness model of tourist experiences (Moscardo, 2009). A mindful tourist is actively engaged, aware of multiple or alternative perspectives, and alert to new information. A mindless tourist acts automatically and follows a routine script, without paying attention or actively processing information. Mindful tourists are more likely to have a satisfying experience, while mindless tourists are more likely to feel helpless, bored or frustrated (Moscardo, 2009). Mindfulness is normally seen as a necessary condition, or first step towards appreciation, meaning-making, attitude and behaviour change. However, changes in behaviour, the ultimate goal of environmental education, do not come easily. It is argued here, therefore, that for visitor environmental behaviour change to be achieved, more than facilitating visitor mindfulness and experiential engagement is usually required, i.e., visitors' reflection on their experience.

## Reflection and experiential learning theories

According to Boud, Keogh and Walker (1985, p.7), “experience alone is not the key to learning”. In order to turn experience into learning, and to gain the maximum possible benefit from an experience, people need to engage in reflection. Reflection is “an important human activity in which people recapture their experience, think about it, mull it over and evaluate it” (Boud, Keogh, & Walker, 1985, p. 19). It involves a deliberate attempt to process the events, and the associated feelings, to bring ideas to consciousness and make sense of them, to integrate them with previous knowledge and understandings, and to make choices about future actions. Similarly, Mezirow’s (1991) concept of “transformative learning” incorporates reflection as a process through which people can challenge and transform the “meaning perspectives” they hold. Jordi (2011, p.193) suggests that people are “forever reconstructing themselves” and seeking to make meaning through processes of experiential learning. These processes include physical sensing, perception, memory, understanding and decision making, and help to bring the felt experience to cognitive awareness.

Kolb’s (1984) theory of experiential learning suggests that there are four stages in the experiential learning cycle: *Concrete Experience* provides a basis for *Reflective Observation*, which elicits the personal meaning of the experience. This may then be followed by *Abstract Conceptualisation*, where new concepts are formed. These are developed into implications for action, through which a change is made in a process of *Active Experimentation*, and this in turn leads to the next *Concrete Experience*. In simpler terms, this is a cycle of experiencing, reflecting, thinking and acting.

## Reflection and experiential learning in ecotourism contexts

Our research in the context of wildlife-based ecotourism experiences (Ballantyne, Packer and Sutherland, 2011) has found evidence of the four stages of the experiential learning cycle outlined above. Visitors’ responses four months after participating in a wildlife tourism experience (the *concrete experience*) showed evidence of *reflective observation* through which they had processed and created meaning from their experience. Some visitors appeared to have come to a new understanding of their environmental responsibility (*abstract conceptualisation*) which they had attempted to translate into new environmental practices in their everyday lives (*active experimentation*). This process is illustrated by the following comments made by visitors to four different wildlife tourism sites:

*I saw the turtles walk to the sea (concrete experience) and I felt that humans need to protect them (reflective observation); the world is for all of us (abstract conceptualisation).* (Turtle-viewing ecotourist)

*I felt completely relaxed watching them (concrete experience) and panic at the same time as to how to protect these amazing animals (reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation).* (Whale-watching ecotourist)

*It made me much more aware of the cycle of life that surrounds us (reflective observation) and that every human action has an effect on the planet (abstract conceptualisation). (Whale-watching ecotourist)*

*We don't look after what we have and the realisation that it is not going to be there forever and our children will miss out on what we have if we don't take care of it (reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation). (Aquarium visitor)*

*My feelings have become more passionate about the need to be aware of our impact on the environment (reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation). (Marine theme park visitor)*

*I felt I was actually part of it (concrete experience, reflective observation) that it actually was something that I could influence (abstract conceptualisation). (Turtle-viewing ecotourist)*

*I understand a little more and find myself wondering what little things I can do to help (reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation). (Aquarium visitor)*

*By experiencing them first hand (concrete experience), it impacted on me just how important it really is to protect our waterways and oceans from contaminated substances (reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation) by always thinking about the impact of what you're about to pour down the drain (active experimentation). (Whale-watching ecotourist)*

*Not that I littered before, but it has made me more aware of what other people are doing (reflective observation) and I often pick up after them (abstract conceptualisation, active experimentation). (Aquarium visitor)*

Although only a minority of visitors progressed through the full cycle of experiencing, reflecting, thinking and acting, the fact that *some did* provides evidence of the potential of ecotourism experiences to have a lasting and life-changing impact. Overall, almost half of the respondents displayed evidence that they had reflected on, or cognitively processed, the implications of what they had seen or heard. The importance of reflection in the process of learning from the ecotourism experience has also been confirmed quantitatively (Ballantyne, Packer and Falk, 2011). The extent to which visitors reported having engaged in reflection during their wildlife tourism experience was one of a few variables that were predictive of short- and long-term environmental learning outcomes. Similarly, activities that encouraged a reflective response were among the most successful in facilitating school students' learning from their experiences in natural environments (Ballantyne, Anderson and Packer, 2010; Ballantyne and Packer, 2009).

It should be noted that the process of reflection does not need to be detached from emotions and feelings, but rather these should be considered important sources of experiential knowledge (Michelson, 1996 cited in Jordi, 2011). According to Jordi (2011), reflection can provide a process for integrating sensations, perceptions, feelings, emotions, memories and ideas together with old and new information, to make new

meanings. Boud, Keogh and Walker (1985) consider that addressing feelings is one of the important elements of the reflective process. Our research (Ballantyne, Packer and Sutherland, 2011) also indicated that reflective activity was often built upon an awareness and cognitive interpretation of emotional responses.

Emotional responses alone, however, are not enough to bring about lasting changes in attitudes and behaviours. According to the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty, DeSteno and Rucker, 2001; Petty, Gleicher and Baker, 1991), attitude change may occur in one of two ways: through systematic or mindful processing of relevant arguments, or through simple associations and emotional responses. There is some evidence that greater elaboration or cognitive processing is associated with stronger attitudes, i.e., attitudes that are persistent, resistant and predictive of behaviour (Petty and Krosnick, 1995). Such processing requires deliberate engagement in reflective activities.

Zeppel & Muloin (2007) argue that “the benefits for participants on marine wildlife tours are realized when the affective (emotional) benefits and excitement of seeing unique marine life are integrated with the cognitive (education) benefits of learning new facts about marine wildlife” (p40). The findings of our research support this conclusion, but suggest that more is needed than a presentation of “facts about marine wildlife”. Effective environmental learning involves more than a change or growth in cognitive understanding. Ideally, participants in an ecotourism experience will be led to question their previously held attitudes and beliefs, and make commitments to new ways of interacting with the world. They need to be encouraged to think deeply about what they have seen and heard and to make a personal response.

### **Incorporating reflection into the visitor experience**

Although reflection is very much under the control of the visitor, and dependent to a large extent on the visitors’ interests, motivations and cognitive style, there are some actions that ecotourism operators and interpreters might take to encourage and facilitate reflective processes. These include:

- Designing experiences to keep visitors mindful;
- Providing a time and space for reflection;
- Promoting emotional engagement;
- Highlighting the importance of reflective activity;
- Encouraging imagination;
- Individualising the learning experience;
- Providing opportunities for interpersonal interaction, questioning and discussion;
- Maintaining contact with visitors after the experience;
- Reflecting on your own practice.

Each of these suggestions is discussed in greater depth below.

*Designing experiences to keep visitors mindful*

It has been suggested that mindfulness is the first step towards engaging visitors in reflective activities. Moscardo and her colleagues have identified a number of factors that encourage mindfulness (Moscardo, 2009). These include:

- Good physical orientation
- Variety of activities
- Visitor comfort
- Multisensory stimulation and interactivity
- Choice
- Immersion
- Multiple or new perspectives
- Aspects of place (authenticity, rarity, uniqueness, diversity, cultural significance)
- Themes and narratives

By incorporating at least some of these factors into the ecotourism experience, operators can prepare visitors for a more reflective experience. Highlighting the uniqueness of the natural environment on which the ecotourism experience depends will not only increase visitor mindfulness, but also provide important information that may prompt visitors to reflect on environmental or conservation issues. Providing opportunities for visitors to get as close as possible to rare wildlife or ecosystems, or allowing visitors to observe these from multiple or new perspectives, will increase the likelihood of mindfulness and reflective activity.

#### *Providing a time and space for reflection*

It is often possible to set aside a time and space, as part of the ecotourism experience, for visitors to reflect on the meaning of the experience. This would be most appropriate towards the conclusion of the experience, which according to Forestell and Kaufman (cited by Lück, 2007), is a time of “personal validation” when visitors can make connections between their experience and broader environmental issues. This may take the form of a debriefing session, in which participants are encouraged to recall the details of their experience, attend to the feelings it aroused in them, and consider what deeper meanings it may hold in their lives. Visitors could also be given a personal journal and encouraged to write about their experience and their reactions to it, or they could be encouraged to share their thoughts and feelings with a companion. As part of this process, visitors should be made aware of a range of environmentally responsible behaviours that might contribute to protecting the particular environment that they have just experienced, and prompted to make concrete and achievable plans for changes they will make in response to their experience.

#### *Promoting emotional engagement*

It is known that emotions often prompt curiosity and exploration (Berlyne, 1960; Csikszentmihalyi and Hermanson, 1995) and can lead to greater concentration and willingness to learn (Krapp, Hidi and Renninger, 1992; Pekrun, 1992). In the context of ecotourism, an emotional experience can provoke deeper thought, and lead to a concern and respect for the environment. Ecotourism operators can draw attention to and reinforce emotional responses such as a sense of wonder, awe, excitement and privilege. However, it is important that visitors are encouraged to process these feelings, and use

them as prompts for further thought and decision making, rather than as a short-cut to attitudes and intentions that are quickly forgotten or abandoned.

Ballantyne, Packer and Bond (2012) suggest that interpretation dealing with emotional issues should be guided by five principles, which are also relevant in dealing with environmental issues:

- (1) Narrative and personal storytelling should occupy a central place and should provide multiple points of personal connection with visitors;
- (2) Despair should be balanced with hope, providing visitors with a way to deal with their feelings and move forward;
- (3) Presentation of historical evidence and balanced interpretation should leave visitors feeling educated, rather than persuaded;
- (4) Providing a place or space for reflection should encourage visitors to personalize and internalize their learning; and
- (5) Focusing on the past to inform the future should provide visitors with a way of learning from the mistakes of others and contribute to building a better future for all.

#### *Highlighting the importance of reflective activity*

Reflective activity is a deliberate and thoughtful response on the part of the visitor and requires an investment of mental effort. Visitors may be more willing to engage in reflection if they are made aware of its important place in the learning process, and in gaining maximum benefit from the experience. Preparing visitors before the experience, so that they expect and appreciate the education component may also facilitate this process.

#### *Encouraging imagination*

Experiential learning is as much about the future as it is about the past, and thus draws on the capacity for imagination (Jordi, 2011). Visitors can be encouraged to use their imaginations to experience the natural world in new and different ways, to explore alternative perspectives, and to reflect on the possible consequences of different courses of action. They might also imagine themselves adopting specific environmentally responsible behaviours in their everyday lives and thus mentally rehearse or practice these behaviours.

#### *Individualising the learning experience*

Experiential learning is learner-centered. It relies more on the needs and interests of the learner than on the content or structure of the interpretation or education program. The learning experience, as far as possible, needs to be flexible enough to respond to the individual needs of visitors. Well-trained, competent guides are able to discern and adapt to these needs and thus provide a personalised and engaging experience for visitors. Providing visitors with choices in relation to how, when and if they engage with reflective learning experiences can also allow for individualisation.

#### *Providing opportunities for interpersonal interaction*

Making meaning from experience is often a relational process (Jordi, 2011). For some, it may be an internal dialogue, a process of making connections between different elements of consciousness, or between old and new knowledge. For others, sharing

thoughts and feelings with a companion is a necessary part of the process. Kals, Schumacher and Montada (1999) noted that “the sharing of experiences with significant others may function as an amplifier of the impact of stays in nature” (p 182). Anderson and Shimizu (2007) suggested that discussion and reflection on an experience perform a similar function to rehearsal and thus lead to more detailed and vivid memories. Intergenerational interaction is particularly important, as children and parents are likely to have a strong and mutual influence upon each other’s environmental behaviour (Ballantyne, Fien and Packer, 2001). Ecotourism operators can offer activities that facilitate interpersonal interaction and also include a reflective component. They can also ensure that staff or volunteer guides are available to answer visitors’ questions and initiate conversations.

#### *Maintaining contact with visitors after the experience*

Ballantyne and Packer (2011) argue that it is unrealistic to expect that the full cycle of experiential learning (experiencing, reflecting, thinking and acting) could be completed during a single ecotourism experience. Ideally, visitors need to be supported and encouraged to continue this process after their visit, in the context of their home environment and everyday lives. Web-based technologies and social networking facilities might allow ecotourism providers to maintain contact with visitors after they leave the site (Ballantyne and Packer, 2011), encouraging further reflection and holding people accountable to the commitments they have made.

#### *Reflecting on your own practice*

In order to provide the best possible experience for visitors, ecotourism operators need to themselves engage in reflective practice, drawing on the experiential learning cycle outlined above. Staff at all levels should regularly set aside time to critically observe and reflect on the experiences they provide, experiment with new ideas, and evaluate their impact from the visitors’ perspective.

### **Conclusion**

It is proposed that reflection is often the missing link between ecotourism experiences and environmental actions. It is argued that ecotourism operators should provide experiences that encourage visitors to not only remain mindful, but also engage in intentional reflective activities. A number of actions have been suggested in this regard. These actions will assist ecotourists to extract the maximum benefit from their experience, and have the potential to lead not only to an increase in environmentally responsible behaviour, but also to greater visitor satisfaction.

### **References**

- Anderson, D. and Shimizu, H. (2007). Factors shaping vividness of memory episodes: Visitors’ long-term memories of the 1970 Japan World Exposition. *Memory*, 15 (2), 177-191.
- Ballantyne, R., Anderson, D. and Packer, J. (2010). Exploring the impact of integrated fieldwork, reflective and metacognitive experiences on student environmental learning outcomes. *Australian Journal of Environmental Education*, 26, 47-63.

- Ballantyne, R., Fien, J., and Packer, J. (2001). Intergenerational influence in environmental education: a quantitative analysis. *Australian Journal of Environmental Education*, 17: 1-7.
- Ballantyne, R., Packer, J., and Bond, N., (2012) Interpreting shared and contested histories: The Broken Links Exhibition. *Curator: the Museum Journal*, 55, 2, 153-166.
- Ballantyne, Packer and Falk. (2011) Visitors' learning for environmental sustainability: testing short- and long-term impacts of wildlife tourism experiences using structural equation modelling. *Tourism Management*, 32, 6, 1243-1252.
- Ballantyne, R., Packer, J. and Sutherland, L. (2011) Visitors' memories of wildlife tourism: Implications for the design of powerful interpretive experiences. *Tourism Management*, 32, 4, 770-779.
- Ballantyne, R. and Packer, J. (2009). Introducing a fifth pedagogy: experience-based strategies for facilitating learning in natural environments. *Environmental Education Research*, 15, 2, 243-262.
- Ballantyne, R. and Packer, J. (2011). Using tourism free-choice learning experiences to promote environmentally sustainable behaviour: the role of post-visit 'action resources'. *Environmental Education Research*, 17 (2), 201-215.
- Berlyne, D. E. (1960). *Conflict, arousal, and curiosity*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Boud, D., Keogh, R., & Walker, D. (1985). What is reflection in learning? In D. Boud, R. Keogh, & D. Walker (Eds.), *Reflection: Turning experience into learning* (pp. 7-17). London, England: Kogan Page.
- Boud, D., Keogh, R., & Walker, D. (1985). Promoting reflection in learning: A model. In D. Boud, R. Keogh, & D. Walker (Eds.), *Reflection: Turning experience into learning* (pp. 18-40). London, England: Kogan Page.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M., & Hermanson, K. (1995). Intrinsic motivation in museums: Why does one want to learn? In J. H. Falk & L. D. Dierking (Eds.), *Public Institutions for personal learning: Establishing a research agenda* (pp. 67-77). Washington DC: American Association of Museums, Technical Information Service.
- Jordi, R. (2011). Reframing the concept of reflection: Consciousness, experiential learning, and reflective learning practices. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 61 (2), 181-197.
- Michelson, E. (1996). Usual suspects: Experience, reflection, and the (en)gendering of knowledge. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 15, 438-454.
- Kals, E., Schumacher, D. and Montada, L. (1999) Emotional affinity towards nature as a motivational basis to protect nature. *Environment and Behavior* 31: 178-202.
- Kolb, D. A. (1984). *Experiential Learning: experience as the source of learning and development*. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall.
- Krapp, A., Hidi, S., & Renninger, K. A. (1992). Interest, learning, and development. In K. A. Renninger, S. Hidi, & A. Krapp (Eds.), *The role of interest in learning and development* (pp. 3-25). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Assoc.
- Langer, E.J. (1989). *Mindfulness*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Langer, E.J. (1997). *The power of mindful learning*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Lück, M. (2007). Managing marine wildlife experiences: The role of visitor interpretation programmes. In J. Higham & M. Lück (Eds) *Marine wildlife and tourism management: Insights from the natural and social sciences*, pp. 334-346. Wallingford, Oxfordshire: CABI.



- Mezirow, J. (1991). *Transformative dimensions of adult learning*. Oxford, England: JosseyBass.
- Moscardo, G. (1996). Mindful visitors: Creating sustainable links between heritage and tourism. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 23 (2), 376-387.
- Moscardo, G. (1999). *Making visitors mindful: Principles for creating quality sustainable visitor experiences through effective communication*. Champaign, IL: Sagamore.
- Moscardo, G. (2009) Understanding tourist experience through Mindfulness Theory. In: M. Kozak & A. Decrop (Eds) *Handbook of Tourist Behaviour: Theory and Practice*. Routledge, New York, pp. 99-115.
- Moscardo, G. and Pearce, P.L. (1986). Visitor centres and environmental interpretation: An exploration of the relationships among visitor enjoyment, understanding and mindfulness. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 6, 89-108.
- Pekrun, R. (1992). The impact of emotions on learning and achievement: Towards a theory of cognitive/motivational mediators. *Applied Psychology: An International Review*, 41 (4): 359-376.
- Petty, R.E. & Krosnick, J.A. (1995). *Attitude strength: antecedents and consequences*. Mahwah NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Petty, R.E., DeSteno, D. & Rucker, D.D. (2001). The role of affect in attitude change. In J.P. Forgas (Ed.) *Handbook of affect and social cognition*. Mahwah NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Petty, R. E., Gleicher, F., & Baker, S. M. (1991). Multiple roles for affect in persuasion. In J. P. Forgas (Ed.), *Emotion and social judgments* (pp. 181-200). Oxford: Pergamon Press.
- Revans, R. 1980. *Action learning: New techniques for management*. London: Blond & Briggs, Ltd.
- Revans, R. W. 1982. *The origin and growth of action learning*. Brickley, UK: Chartwell-Bratt.
- Revans, R. W. 1998. *ABC of action learning*. London: Lemos and Crane.
- Schon, D.A. (1983). *The reflective practitioner*. London: Temple Smith.
- Schon, D.A. (1987). *Educating the reflective practitioner*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Zeppel, H. & Muloin, S. (2007). Marine wildlife tours: Benefits for participants. In J. Higham & M. Lück (Eds) *Marine wildlife and tourism management: Insights from the natural and social sciences*, pp. 19-48. Wallingford, Oxfordshire: CABI.