

Eco-tourism : product or process¹

David G Simmons (*Professor of Tourism, Human Sciences Division, Lincoln University New Zealand* (dsimmons@lincoln.ac.nz))

Abstract

How can a concept that individually we believe that we understand, and that is defined as the fastest growing segment of the tourism industry, continue to defy firm definition? While tourists increasingly define themselves as ‘eco’-tourists, and the industry operators increasingly posit to offer eco-tours, eco-treks, eco-lodges ... ; larger questions remain unanswered.

- How might we distinguish eco-tourism from other forms of tourism,
- How do we know when we have achieved eco-tourism,
- Is eco-tourism (of all, or any, other forms of tourism) sustainable?

This paper argues that answers to these questions and a more robust definition of eco-tourism will be found in better analysis and understanding of eco-tourism practices with the environmental resource bases on which it fundamentally depends.

Towards a Definition of Eco-tourism

Although it has long been recognised that tourism and environment are inextricably interwoven, it is generally accepted that the first definition of eco-tourism was coined by Ceballos-Lascurain in 1987 as:

tourism that involves travelling [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).

More recent definitions have seen a constant broadening of this original concept to advocate that it should: improve local welfare, contribute positively to visitor satisfaction, and incorporate an element of environmental education. This broader view is included in Wall's (1997) recent definition of sustainable eco-tourism:

[Sustainable ecotourism] must be economically viable, ecologically sensitive and culturally appropriate (Wall, 1997, p. 483).

Today there are a plethora of definitions of eco-tourism, and this is seen most keenly in the variety of eco-tourism “products” offered to tourists. While there is a common focus on nature conservation values there is no core definition of eco-tourism. Ziffer (1989) described the definitional challenge:

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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.

Thus, three dominant perspectives of eco-tourism can be determined:

1. Commercial operators and national tourism organisations view eco-tourism as an activity occurring in natural settings that is increasing in demand and can be readily converted into 'eco-tourism product'.
2. Conservation organisations view eco-tourism as a tool for nature conservation where the benefits to conservation outweigh the costs to the environment. For them, eco-tourism can have strong links with sustainable development, (although this itself is another deeply contested context with only nascent links to tourism theory and models (Butler 1991; Wall 1997)
3. Community Development organisations perceive eco-tourism as indigenous based ('alternative')-tourism that delivers benefit to poor local communities.

While each perspective has much in common with the others yet there is considerable capacity for conflict between them. As a first step Ryan (1998) argues for the development of a prescriptive definition of eco-tourism. To this end he has returned to the historical origins of the concept and under the general banner of "eco-tourism is a symbiotic relationship between tourism and conservation", has added that to be operational (ie achievable and measurable) the activity :

- Must be nature based;
- Must be environmentally sustainable
- Must make a contribution to nature conservation.

More recent additions to definitions, that include environmental education and local economic development, are excluded because they do not encompass all the environments where eco-tourism might occur (e.g. antarctica), do not offer direct insights into operational criteria (e.g what level of involvement /resourcing /language constitutes environmental "education"), or simply do not distinguish eco-tourism from its many other variants (-shouldn't all tourism lead to various (undefined) levels of local economic development). He goes further to caution that because the term eco-tourism currently exists outside the market place there is a need to shift it to a "common property" resource whereby those who seek to use the term are active in protecting its integrity.

To assist in an attempt to operationalise the concept four key dimensions : tourists; environmental; economic and social; are elaborated briefly below.

Tourists

Much rhetoric exists about the "eco"-tourist. Let me start with an obvious, but often unasked question :

Why would we believe that small groups of active, educated and inquisitive tourists in unique (at time fragile) environmental situations would be less impactful than hosting larger numbers of tourists in specially prepared and managed environments?

We also need to question the actual size and rate of growth of the eco-tourism market? Here the lack of a prescriptive definition creates most difficulties and at worst has led to almost any nature based activity being labelled and sold as eco-tourism. Industry commentators in New Zealand suggest that eco-tourists comprise 4 – 5 percent of the New Zealand market, with the potential to grow to 7 - 8 percent in the near future (Coventry, 1997). However aside this measure the *New Zealand Engineer* (1996) has recently referred to all tourists coming to New Zealand as “eco-tourists”; while the Australian Commonwealth Department of Environment, Sport and Territories (1996) questioned the need for an eco-tourism strategy because there were only possibly 60 – 80 “pure” eco-tourism operators in Australia. Without an operational definition we simply cannot define the level of activity.

I believe that we also need to question the myth that eco-tourism is the fastest growing sector worldwide. Certainly cruises are growing very fast (and we now see this in New Zealand) as is the senior market, and some of the traditional “seaside holiday” forms of holiday. Nature-based tourism is generally accepted to be growing at double the rate of overall tourism (10 – 25 % and 6.75 % respectively).

Whatever the answers to the above questions it remains quite mischievous to attempt to define eco-tourism on the basis of either the motivation or activity of tourists. At the simplest level an eco-tourism activity may be a small component of a much broader trip (business trips included) (Weaver, 1998), or eco-tourists might simply represent the nursery stage in an eventual succession to mass tourism (see Butler, 1980; 1989).

We also know little of the “brand loyalty” or repeat visitation patterns of so called eco-tourists. Similarly we do not know where an eco-tourism experience might fit within a tourist’s motivational and experiential “career”. Do tourists begin their lives as eco-tourists, to become resort tourists, and return to become eco-tourists according to the flow of life cycle constraints? Or are there much more complex patterns at play?

The environmental dimension :

Proponents of eco-tourism often assume that its activities are environmentally benign. This assumption is made because the number of visitors and party sizes are small, and because the visitors are interested in aspects of the environment and are, therefore, assumed to respect natural phenomena. However, the timing of visitation the nature of use-impact relationships and distances travelled suggest that eco-tourism can be very demanding on environmental resource systems.

Eco-tourism is usually directed to unique environments which may have limited ability to withstand use pressures. For New Zealand geothermal areas, and sub-antarctic islands are ready examples.

In the absence of longitudinal studies, it is often assumed that relationship between volumes of use and associated impacts is linear. This is unlikely to be the case. In fact, it is more likely to be curvilinear or even step-like and even small numbers of users generate impacts (Cole 1989). In New Zealand our state of the environmental reporting and diverse recreation environments suggest there is a considerable work to be undertaken (Ward & Beanland, 1996).

Even if impact process were clearly understood significant management problems still remain when there are overlapping commercial concessions in protected areas and only limited monitoring or knowledge of potentially much larger use volumes from the general public.

In the past much research has been directed at finding a single “carrying capacity” of recreation resources. However the concept which includes bio-physical and physical as well as social and psychological elements has been found largely unworkable (Stankey and McCool 1984). Current research attempts to find the “limits of acceptable change”² and manage recreation opportunities within a spectrum of resource management constraints (Driver, Brown, Stankey and Gregoire 1987).

Finally, even if the on-site impact is small, the off-site and en-route impacts may be substantial. For example, the considerable distances travelled by eco-tourists, often by plane and then land, consume large amounts of energy per capita and contribute to global climate change just as much, and perhaps more, than that of the average mass tourist (Wall, 1997).

Economic Considerations

Recent definitions of eco-tourism increasingly advocate that it should contribute to local economies, but how can this realistically distinguish eco-tourism when such goals are a core requirement of all tourism development?

Eco-tourists spend a great deal of money. Often qualitative motivational dimensions drive them as they seek out the ‘very best’ experiences from their limited discretionary income. However, as Wall (1997) points out a large proportion of this money is spent at the place of origin, primarily to pay for travel, with usually relatively little being spent at the destination. Many of the places which are likely to be of interest to eco-tourists are likely to be relatively remote, with rudimentary infrastructure, and with little for sale except experiences (Butler 1989). The result is

² FoRST funded research of this nature is scheduled to commence in New Zealand as a joint venture between Lincoln University’s Tourism Research and Education Centre (TREC) and Landcare CRI, however the variability of recreational use, environmental response and day to day conditions make this a particularly complex task.

that, with some notable exceptions, the local economic impact of eco-tourism is likely to be small. However, even though sums of money may not be large, it should be acknowledged that their consequences may be substantial when they are injected into economies which are also small. Recent work by Nyaupane (1998) in Nepal indicates that even in a specifically deployed eco-tourism areas local development needs are not being met simply because opportunities for local income generation coupled with low visitor volumes do not generate sufficient local income to meet expectations.

Small group sizes and the restricted number of visits (required to ensure minimal ecological impacts and high quality experiences) also indicate that, unless prices are very high, profits will not be large. Over time, the inevitable profit motive will surely tempt tour operators and destination areas to increase both the sizes and numbers of parties. Thus, an economic imperative also suggests growth in the direction of mass tourism, for economic growth is usually a goal of destination areas and economies of scale are likely to be sought by eco-tourism operators (see Butler, 1980).

An important economic consideration centres on the contemporary desire to “internalise the externalities” of production processes as a means to regulation. For tourism the “freedom of entry” to the core tourism product (viz., unique environments and settings, hospitality and cultures) suggests we now need to search for appropriate ‘instruments’ (pricing and regulation) as means to regulate use. For the present the converse is seen to operate as potential visitors are often encouraged to visit such places before it is too late.

Finally in the wider nature conservation debate the offering of eco-tourism development to geographically dispersed groups of indigenous peoples (as is often the case in the Pacific) may be, at best, naive. “Cashing up” one’s standing crop of tress will most often appeal over longer term eco-tourism development which in fact requires expenditure for the development of tourist facilities and overcoming the considerable difficulties of establishing marketing and reliable travel links to core tourist flows or centres. Indeed over-promising the benefits and ease of eco-tourism development may have already done much to undermine the concept as a development tool.

Social Consequences

According to Butler (1974), the magnitude of social impacts associated with tourism increases with the number of visitors and also reflects the degrees of difference between hosts and guests in such attributes as wealth, race and language. In many eco-tourism destinations, the number of visitors is small but so is the number of permanent residents. Furthermore, in many locations, residents of the third world are visited by people from the first world. In such circumstances, the potential for social impacts is great (Simmons, 1988).

Where local people do not receive benefits, they are likely to compete with the tourism industry for the use of scarce natural resources. This is most acute when local peoples must struggle to meet basic human needs. In Nepal it was hoped that residents

would benefit from the development of specially designated eco-tourism trails but, in the absence of relevant skills (including language and management skills) and capital, and with small numbers of visitors, it is difficult for local residents to play a meaningful part in, and benefit substantially from, eco-tourism (Nyaupane et al. 1998). Furthermore, according to Boo (1992), many tour operators and lodge owners have come to realise that having the added dimension of local involvement is appreciated by tourists and also affords a significant marketing opportunity.

Finally, there is a distinction emerging in eco-tourism between first and third world contexts that parallel the status and definition of national parks and protected areas. In terms of the core definitional requirement that eco-tourism must contribute to nature conservation this goal may be achieved by financial management systems in the former, but may simply be measured by the degree to which the impacts in local environments are reduced in the latter (Ryan, 1998)

Eco-tourism in the wider context :

Eco-tourism, especially as it is presently constructed may not be sustainable. There is nothing to suggest that even low levels of visitation would be sustainable in some situations. To achieve its goals the effects of ecotourism must be monitored, and management systems must be in place to restrict unsustainable activities or effects.

Eco-tourism management requires that it moves from its current product orientation to a process orientation.

The goals for eco-tourism indicate that it will require on-going communication between various stakeholders, - local community members, conservation advocates, resource managers and tourists themselves.

It should also be noted that while any one eco-tourism activity might be sustainable there is still much to be done to achieve sustainable tourism. Much greater consultation and communication will then be required to place tourism within an overall sustainable development strategy where there would presumably be inter and intra sectorial trade offs (Butler, 1991; Wall, 1997).

To be sustainable eco-tourism will need to be linked to wider understanding of both ecological and tourism “systems”. For example are eco-tourists simply identifiers of the first stage of tourist “succession” whereby hardier species of tourists are soon followed by softer species, aided and abetted by increasing attention to the tourism substrate by first local and then exogenous investors in tourism plant. Elsewhere in the tourism kingdom there are an estimated to soon be 600million tourists ... and they cannot simply all be eco-tourists. Most will continue to be “mass tourists” ... the rejection of which was an early motivator in defining alternative forms of tourism such as eco-tourism. Perhaps the most important challenge facing tourism planners and managers is not to find a means of inserting small numbers of environmentally-

aware tourists into pristine environments; rather it is to devise sustainable forms of mass tourism.

Australia and Canada have developed sector specific eco-tourism strategies and a New Zealand equivalent has been called for by Pearson (1997). A key plank in such a strategy is the certification of eco-tourism operators, which to Ryan (1998) will lead to legal contestation of the term as those excluded seek to maintain the use of the valuable “eco” label.

There is much that science can do to inform these decisions. First it must be an active participant in debate, and has a key role in moving from myth and rhetoric to fact and then to policy and management systems. Immediate key areas indicated in the above discussion are in the establishment of indicators of environmental change induced by tourism. Given the great range (of often high energy environments) in which tourism occurs, the establishment of environmental indicators is in itself a very large research agenda. Within the tourism industry itself increasing numbers of firms are looking for “cleaner production processes”. Such approaches have been documented by Hawkes and Williams (1993) and are finding favour among tourists and firms within New Zealand (Pearson, 1997).

Economic research is required to measure and find appropriate instruments to counter-balance the range of externalities that surround every aspect of tourism, especially those forms occurring in natural settings. Close links will also need to be maintained with social scientists, not just students of tourism but those involved in policy studies and planning applications. As a multi-sectoral activity tourism challenges a multi-disciplinary response from those in the research community, and also invites closer dialogue with the many industry actors.

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Green Travel Directory of Organisations (lists key organisations with interest in eco-tourism)
<http://www.green-travel.com/gtdirog.htm>

Eco-tourism statistical fact sheet
<http://www.ecotourism.org/textfiles/stats.txt>

Eco-tourism Bibliography
<http://www.hawaii.gov/tourism/Eco/Ecoi.html>

Performance measurement Reporting
<http://iisd1.iisd.ca/about/prodcat/perfrep.html>