

Re-considering Ecotourism: the case for systems-thinking in tourism studies

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In past decade, ecotourism has grown at an unprecedented rate. Its worldwide proliferation reflects the general expectation that it can support, or even link conservation and socioeconomic development. Assessing the extent to which ecotourism is able to meet this expectation, however, is challenging. Thus, the impacts of ecotourism on conservation and on development are partial, at best. I argue that this shortcoming results from the dominant conceptualization of ecotourism as a linear, input-output model. In response, I propose systems-thinking as more appropriate and comprehensive approach to better evaluate ecotourism and assess its impacts.

The systems-thinking approach is used to understand the whole rather than the sum of its parts. It is also employed to uncover the root of persistent problems. Thus, it has been extensively applied in a wide range of social and dynamic disciplines such as business and education. Given the inherent complexity of ecotourism, I advocate its use in this growing field. A system approach recognizes ecotourism as a system composed of various sets of social and natural relationships that operate in different ways and function at different scales. From this vantage point, relationships and scales can be investigated to uncover deep seated issues, which help to better understand the conservation and development impacts of ecotourism.

In sum, a system-thinking approach of ecotourism calls for a shift, a reconsideration of the discipline, and how it is studied and evaluated. Thus, through systems-thinking the impacts of ecotourism are not reduced to cause and effect or limited to quantifiable measures. Instead, systems-thinking enables researchers to focus on complex social issues such as equity or fairness, decision-making, and power, which influence, and at times dictate its impacts. By digging both deep and wide byway of systems-thinking, ecotourism best practices and guidelines can also be identified.