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CREATING ECO-TOURISM PRODUCT

SUMMARY

Since its first appearance in the early 80's, eco-tourism has attracted many tourists to its cause. Even more, it has become one of the major industries of the national economy and a significant portion of the Gross Domestic Product in some countries such as Costa Rica, Ecuador, Kenya etc. Eco-tourism is an extraordinary tool for conservation, a support mechanism for poverty alleviation, and as a driver of sustainable development if carefully conceived, well managed and strictly controlled. But the creation of eco-touristic product is a delicate job, it has to be done carefully. The environment that will be touristic valorized has to stay untouched, in the sense of not losing any of its main characteristic and appearance. That is a hard job, since the valorization may include creating some paths, putting signs, building different buildings and so on. Therefore the eco-touristic product, whether it includes a destination or a hotel, has to fulfill some prerequisites. It has to perfectly "fit in" the environment. Also it is very important that if these prerequisites are fulfilled to be maintained further. The creating of the eco-touristic product has to consider many issues and go through a procedure of few stages. That's why many scientists have arguments "for" and "against" turning a protected area or environment into a tourist attraction. Even if the eco-touristic product is done according to the stages and it doesn't change the environment, there is still the issue of the visitors and their influence on the area. These and some other issues will be part of this paper.

Key words: eco-tourism, eco-tourism product, creating

INTRODUCTION

The term ecotourism was first mentioned by Mexican consultant Hector Ceballos - Lascurain in the 1984 edition of *Americas Birds*. His definition it first appeared in the literature in 1987 in a paper entitled "The future of ecotourism".

According to Hector Ceballos – Lascurain, ecotourism is “ traveling to relatively undisturbed or uncontaminated natural areas with the specific object of studying, admiring and enjoying the scenery and its wild plants and animals, as well as any existing cultural aspects (both past and present) found in these areas.”¹

Ecotourism is a simple word, but a complex and often contradictory concept. With the emergence of the term ecotourism, occurring many definitions that try to define and explain this term from different aspects. There is no one universal definition for ecotourism.

David A. Fennel defines ecotourism as a “sustainable form of natural resource-based tourism that focuses primarily on experiencing and learning about nature, and which is ethically managed to be low-impact, non-consumptive and locally oriented (control, benefits and scale). It typically occurs in natural areas, and should contribute to the conservation or preservation of such areas.”²

His definition is based on what are felt to be the most important aspects of this phenomenon and on the need to be concise in including such principles.

Although the goal of ecotourism are undisturbed and uncontaminated natural areas, however, all forms of travel to natural areas can not be called ecotourism.

Wallace and Pierce suggest that this tourism may be said to be true ecotourism if it addresses six principles:³

1. It entails a type of use that minimizes negative impacts to the environment and to local people.
2. It increases the awareness and understanding of an area’s natural and cultural systems and the subsequent involvement of visitors in issues affecting those systems.
3. It contributes to the conservation and management of legally protected and other natural areas.
4. It maximizes the early and long-term participation of local people in the decision-making process that should occur.
5. It directs economic and other benefits to local people that complement rather than overwhelm or replace traditional practices (farming, fishing, social systems, etc.).
6. It provides special opportunities for local people and nature tourism employees to utilize and visit natural areas and learn more about the wonders that other visitors come to see.

¹ Weaver, D., *Sustainable tourism: Theory and Practice*, Elsevier, 2006, p.192

² Fennel, D., *Ecotourism: an introduction*, second edition, Taylor & Francis Group, 2003, p.25

³ Ibid, p.23

1. TYPES OF ECOTOURISM

There are two types of ecotourism: comprehensive (hard) and minimalist (soft) ecotourism. Crucial differences between these two types of ecotourism related to market experience characteristics (specialized or diversionary focus, few or many services, remote or well serviced sites, small or large group, etc) as well as sector outcomes and philosophies (holistic or elemental approach, enhancement or status quo sustainability, global or local spatial scope, etc.) (figure 1).

Figure 1. Characteristics of hard and soft ecotourism as ideal types

Hard (Active, deep)	Soft (Passive, shallow)
←————— the ecotourism spectrum —————→	
Strong environ.commitment	Moderate environ.commitment
Enhancive sustainability	Steady state sustainability
Specialized trips	Multi-purpose trips
Long trips	Short trips
Small groups	Larger groups
Physically active	Physically passive
Physical challenge	Physical comfort
Few if any services expected	Services expected
Emphasis on personal experience	Emphasis on interpretation
Make own travel arrangements	Rely on travel agents and tour operators

Source: Weaver, D., *Sustainable tourism: Theory and Practice*, Elsevier, 2006, 195

According to Weaver and Lawton, despite the hard and soft ecotourism, there is a third type of ecotourism - structured ecotourism, that combines elements of both types of ecotourism.

Fennel and weaver propose a modified comprehensive model of ecotourism, which has universal application and will cover as hard as well as soft ecotourism. This model of ecotourism is presented in figure 2.

Figure 2. **Modified Comprehensive Ecotourism Model**



Source: Weaver, D., *Sustainable tourism :Theory and Practice* , Elsevier, 2006, 204

2. BENEFITS OF ECOTOURISM

Any kind of tourism has both positive and negative effects (economic, socio-cultural and environmental). Ecotourism strives to have as small effect on local population as well as a local ecosystem. But, the simple fact that visitors are there, can influence local culture and environment. Indeed, one of the main weaknesses of ecotourism starts with the success of ecotourism and increasing the number of tourists. The questions then becomes whether the influence is positive or negative. Based on the motivation of the involvement of tourists and their increased environmental awareness, should be expected ecotourism to have at least adverse effects compared to other types of tourism. It refers to the environmental and socio-cultural effects. In this case, we would expect the positive effects of ecotourism i.e. its benefits to overcome its negative effects i.e. weaknesses.

There are many different benefits that can be derived from ecotourism:^{4 , 5}

- Ecotourism encourages an understanding of the impacts of tourism on the natural, cultural and human environments.
- Ecotourism ensure a fair distribution of benefits and costs.
- Ecotourism generates local employment, both directly in the tourism sector and in various support and resource management sectors (ecotourism creates directly jobs for guides, managers, researchers,.. and indirectly jobs through tourist demands for food, accommodation, transportation, souvenirs,..).
- Ecotourism stimulates profitable domestic industries-hotels and other lodging facilities, restaurants and other food services, transportation systems, handicrafts and guide services.
- Ecotourism generates foreign exchange for the country and injects capital and new money into the local economy.
- Ecotourism diversifies the local economy, particularly in rural areas where agricultural employment may be sporadic or insufficient.
- Ecotourism seeks decision-making among all segments of the society, including local populations, so that tourism and other resource users can coexist. It incorporates planning and zoning which ensure tourism development appropriate to the carrying capacity of the ecosystem.
- Ecotourism stimulates improvements to local transportation, communications and other basic community infrastructures.
- Ecotourism creates recreational facilities which can be used by local communities as well as domestic and international visitors. It also encourages and helps pay for preservation of archeological as well as domestic and international visitors. It also encourages and helps pay for preservation of archeological sites, and historic buildings and districts.

⁴ Wearing, S., Neil, J., *Ecotourism: impacts, potentials and possibilities*, Elsevier, 1999, p.8,9

⁵ Gaul, D., *Environmental impacts of ecotourism*, 2003, p.2,12

- Ecotourism monitors, assesses and manages the impacts of tourism, develops reliable methods of environmental accountability, and counters any negative effect.
- Ecotourism improvement comfort and living conditions (Facilities which have primarily been built for tourism i.e. roads, trails, lookouts can be used by locals as well. Ecotourism improved transportation connections in and out of areas where it occurs.).
- Ecotourism improved education for (young) locals (ecotourism depends on local guides which have to be trained; interaction with tourists lead to an improved general education and language skills; ecotourism operators offer environmental education for local communities and/or basic education for local children; locals spend considerable amounts of the money, they earned through ecotourism for their children's education).
- Ecotourism revalues elements of traditional culture.
- Ecotourism improved knowledge/data about animal distribution and behavior (scientific research on wildlife is more intensive in ecotourism areas due to increased public awareness; financial gains of ecotourism are partly used for scientific research).
- Ecotourism improved knowledge/data about plant distributions and conditions (scientific research on plants is more intensive in areas with ecotourism due to increased public awareness and financial sources).
- Ecotourism improved healthcare (several ecotourism operators support local health facilities or fund regular visits by nurses and doctors).
- Ecotourism promotes the protection of wildlife (locals, working in ecotourism gain a better understanding on wildlife and change their views concerning the value of fauna because they recognized their dependence on wildlife and feel personally connected with wild animals and/or admire them).
- Ecotourism promotes the protection of (native) flora (locals, working in ecotourism gain a better understanding on plants and change their views concerning the value of plants because they recognized their dependence on native flora and feel personally connected with vegetation and/or admire plants).

3. HOW TO CREATE ECO-TOURISTIC PRODUCT

Creating eco-touristic product, and offering it to the touristic market is a delicate job. There are many things that need to be considered, basically because the eco-tourist product should be environmentally safe and consider the principals of sustainable development. Therefore when creating an eco-touristic product the following steps should be considered:

1. considering sustainability
2. feasibility study
3. planning
4. assessment and approval
5. construction
6. operation and management

3.1 Considering sustainability

Before starting with any of the following steps in creating an eco-touristic product we need to consider the sustainability of the product. This means that our product should be in coordination with the sustainable development of the area. Ecologically sustainable development (ESD) aims to achieve the best environmental, economic and social outcomes. ESD recognizes that the existing environment creates opportunities and sets constraints. There will inevitably be situations where the goals of economic growth, environmental protection and a healthy society are irreconcilable and choices will have to be made. In such situations, there will usually have to be trade-offs to obtain the best economic, environmental and social outcomes. Decision-makers will have to choose between alternative courses of action in deciding whether a proposed development should proceed. They must weigh the costs of proceeding with a project against the benefits that would arise from it. The challenge for tourism developers and operators is to develop the tourism industry in a way which conserves its natural resources and built heritage base and minimizes any negative environmental, ecological, social and cultural impact. Therefore tourism will be ecologically sustainable if it:

- does not use non-renewable resources faster than renewable substitutes can be found for them
- does not use renewable resources faster than they can be replenished
- minimizes operational energy consumption
- does not release pollutants faster than the biosphere can process them to a harmless state
- has no impact on biodiversity and ecological systems and processes
- maintains a full range of recreational, educational and cultural opportunities for the present generation and future generations
- benefits local communities and the region socially and economically
- does not affect the capacity of other sectors of the economy to achieve ecological sustainability.

3.2 Feasibility study

The purpose of this initial stage of the development process is to clearly define what you want - here you are limited only by your imagination - and to find out whether it will be possible to realize your project before you commit lots of time and money to it. Your goal is to identify an investment option that will be worth your while. Identifying a favorable investment means evaluating alternative proposals, that may be unique projects or unique approaches to a single project. The possibilities for your development are determined by the available opportunities and the unavoidable limits of your resources; the market; the environment, ecology and heritage of a site; the needs and requirements of the local community and political realities.

In this stage it's necessary to produce a profile of your tourist product in development. You have to define the intended market and clientele; the facilities and services the eco-touristic product will include; the atmosphere, style and quality that will be offered; SWOT analysis on similar products; as well as the type of site that will be suitable the most for development of the eco-touristic product.

It is critical that all developers consult with local council and other authorities involved in the approval process at the outset. It is crucial that this consultation takes place in this step to find out all the useful information, for example what relevant local and regional plans exist, who owns or has an interest in the land and so on.

If you have compiled your profile with no particular site in mind, you will need to select a suitable one. Bear in mind that the site you initially select for development may not be suitable for the venture you have profiled. If this is the case, and you remain committed to the site, you will have to refine your intended market, services and products to be compatible with the environment and ecology of the site, and the needs and requirements of the approval authorities and local communities.

Since you should've considered the sustainability in the preplanning stage, now it's necessary to consider the social acceptability of our eco-touristic product. This is very important if your product includes indigenous peoples and their every-day routines. It is very important that your product fits in with the local region's perceived identity. That's why it is very important to find acceptance in the community, by assuring the local inhabitants that your product won't go against their routines, everyday life, free movement etc.

Considering all this, the next thing we need to do is to predict the financial income from your product. The task is to balance a range of factors, including the target market, the envisaged facilities and the site's environment. In addition, you must attempt to identify any support for or resistance to the proposal by the communities and local, regional and/or state authorities.

At the very end of this step it is important to reconsider the proposal in light of the information gathered. At this stage, it is useful to return to your profile of the proposed development. Evaluate it in the context of any new information about your preferred site or alternative sites that has emerged from your consultation and assessments of ecological sustainability. Note any potential problems or drawbacks - environmental, social or economic - you may face. This finishes the feasibility study.

3.3 Planning

The goal of this stage is to prepare a clear plan for the development. This plan should include the necessary designs for buildings, infrastructure, landscaping and access; a draft environmental management system; and thorough financial and logistical assessments of the project's viability and sustainability. This process goes through several stages:

- plan a workable and manageable development
- develop a business plan
- submit proposal to prospective financiers

Planning a workable and manageable development involves ensuring that your revised plan meets the requirements of your proposed development, and that implementing it will not have a negative impact on the environment. In addition to formulating a draft system for environmental management, you will need to consider four aspects of your development. The **first** one is environmental management. Although you may think it a little early to consider an environmental management system before design of your venture on paper, this is precisely the time to consider the issues it raises, especially because it will guide you throughout the design and construction stages of the development proposal. The **second** is environmentally and

socially responsible design, which means that the plan should include the site's environment and its local communities needs. Environmentally and socially responsible access is the **third** aspect of planning a workable and manageable development. It means that, when planning you should consider how your target tourist will access your eco-touristic product (how will they arrive, how can they get to the destination without harming the environment). The **fourth** aspect is environmentally and socially responsible waste management.

To guide and propel the process of development, you will need to produce a detailed business plan. A business plan will help you if you need to seek financial backing for your venture. Bear in mind that developments which are sustainable in the long term can involve higher initial capital outlay to establish the site. If the site is carefully designed and managed, these costs should be recovered quickly in the operational phase. If traditional building solutions are adopted without considering any alternatives, the project may not be viable in the short or long term because of costs associated with building maintenance, consumer disinterest or site degradation. You will also need to factor in the time and cost of gaining the necessary permission to proceed from the authorities. Planning for this stage of the process should begin here. The more effort you expend in meeting the various requirements for gaining approval, the easier it will be to get it. Ultimately, it is worth spending time, effort and money on anticipating and addressing both environmental and social concerns.

You may need to solicit funding from an external source to finance the development. There are many different financial agreements into which you can enter, though some arrangements will suit your situation better than others. Whatever your arrangement with prospective financiers, they will need to know certain things regarding your proposed development. As part of this process, you will need to have the architectural plans drafted so that a quantity surveyor can verify your financial calculations.

3.4 Assessment and approvals

The purpose of this stage is to lodge a proposal that is likely to be approved, which means anticipating, as far as possible, any problems and addressing them before they fully materialize. This step has two very important stages:

- organize an effective presentation of your proposal
- lodge the proposal with the relevant authority

Organizing an effective presentation is crucial to further development of the tourist product, especially when we are trying to attract investors. All your efforts in the previous steps will be for nothing if your presentation doesn't convince your investors that your eco-product (will) have fulfilled all the necessary requirements – environmental, social and economical. That's why your presentation should include some statements and your assessments considering these issues, as well as the effects of your eco-touristic product in long terms. Because of this when creating and making the presentation the following advice may be considered to increase your positive outcome:

- address any state/territory-specific legislative responsibilities you have as a developer and assess the consistency of your proposal with relevant state/territory policies

- include a statement or assessment of the development's potential impact on the ecology of the site and adjacent areas, and procedures and design features to mitigate this impact
- include a statement or assessment of the development's social impact and steps you are taking to establish good relationships with local communities
- acknowledge Indigenous groups in whose traditional country the proposed development lies, and include a protocol for negotiation with and involvement of Indigenous communities or organizations
- include the business plan for the development, including the cost of site redevelopment in the event that the development is not completed, and who will meet such a cost
- include your draft environmental management system
- include the architectural plans for the development
- include the quantity surveyor's report
- commit to some form of financial guarantee - that is, include details of the process to restore the site in the event that the development cannot continue.

Once you lodge the proposal, you may still be required to work further to convince the authorities of your development's value and sustainability. Be prepared to negotiate compromises to meet the social or environmental objections to the proposal and to ensure the ongoing viability of your venture.

3.5 Construction

The goal of this stage is to develop your tourism site with minimal environmental impact and maximum community support, and to keep to your financial outlay predictions. First you need to establish an environmental management system for the construction process. The construction process need not have a detrimental effect on the environment. There are many ways that you can minimize or eliminate the impact of construction on the ecosystems of the area. You will need to devise these according to the particular circumstances of the site. Some general examples of strategies you might adopt include using cleared vegetation as mulch for gardens and landscaped areas; making an agreement with contractors to confine workers within specified areas; devising controls to prevent littering, damage to existing vegetation, introduction of non-indigenous plants, animals and micro-organisms, fire-lighting and the use of firearms.

When this is done it is very important to arrange the labor and materials for construction. You can benefit from using local resources wherever possible. This could involve arranging labor from the local area, and using local materials for construction. All contractors you engage will need to be briefed according to your established guidelines.

At the end of this stage you will need to monitor the construction process to ensure that your established guidelines are followed, to correct any deviations from them, or to change your guidelines or your method of fostering compliance if these are not effective. Remember to talk to the people doing the work - they may notice things that you have overlooked, and present good ideas for improving the environmental performance of the construction phase. In any event, it is important to be prepared to alter construction methods in the interests of protecting the environment.

3.6 Operation and management

By this stage your development is built and, hopefully, your site and its ecosystems remain intact and you can begin to recoup your investment. The goal of this ongoing stage is to review, ensure ongoing implementation, and evaluate the effectiveness of your environmental management system developed during the previous steps. If you have developed your environmental management system in the early stages of your development proposal, you will find that you will already have infrastructure in place to help you protect the environment and ecology of your site. During the operation of your development you will be able to assess how well it complies with your plan for environmental management. In the current social and economic climate, both coastal processes and tourism developments can be seen as needing protection from one another. Developments can be seen to threaten to disrupt, curb or destroy natural coastal processes and, in turn, those processes threaten to inundate, damage or destroy the developments, or otherwise incapacitate them. This step is consisted of implementing your environmental management system and your system for monitoring and evaluating, as well as adopting procedures or practices to meet identified needs.

The implementation of your environmental management system should include managing maintenance and repairs, staff, visitors and community involvement. You will need procedures to repair any unforeseen events that cause damage to your site (environment, facilities, infrastructure etc.), whether it is the cause of the human or natural factor. Providing training in appropriate environmental management and Indigenous cultural heritage will ensure that staff are aware of their responsibilities as employees of a sustainable development. Staff need to understand how important it is that the site's environmental performance is sustainable, and how to ensure its sustainability. Getting your visitors to behave appropriately is best achieved through on-site guidance. Education can encourage visitors, for instance, to use preferred cleaning products, to conserve water (by limiting the length of their showers or the frequency of their linen-washing) and to refrain from feeding wildlife or lighting fires. You can also promote a regional approach to tourism - encourage your visitors to use local resources, visit local attractions and help the local economy. Also it is very important that you involve the local community.

You will need a system for monitoring and evaluating the actual operation of your development. Audits may be conducted to assess overall environment management procedures - how well the practice conforms to the environmental policies and procedures, for instance. Or evaluations can be used to examine individual areas of the operation such as energy efficiency and water conservation. The process of monitoring and evaluating the development will be invaluable in assessing its progress in relation to the targets and milestones established in your environmental management plan. The evaluation process will also provide you with all the information necessary to amend the system where it falls short of a sustainable performance. You should therefore identify appropriate responses to any indication of environmental stress. Aspects such as water quality, the number and range of flora and fauna, visitor impact and so on should all be considered. Monitoring and evaluation practices can also be applied to the two other arms of ecological sustainability: economic and social viability. You will need to conduct regular assessments of the development's economic

performance, and it will be a useful exercise to similarly assess its performance in the eyes of the people involved with it: staff, visitors and local communities. You should not necessarily limit your procedures for monitoring and evaluation to analyses of environmental impact. Consider your staff, visitors and local communities as well. From this point on, ensuring the sustainability of your development is up to you and your staff. Future requirements will depend entirely on the circumstances of your operation.

The above six step procedure in creating an eco-touristic product is given more as guidance to an easier way of creating this kind of touristic product. By following these six steps you assure that your product will meet all the requirements, that will satisfy the needs of all the stakeholders, that you will more easily find additional financial assets or an investor, that your income will be high and you won't have many additional fees and expenditures for maintenance, as well as improving the efficiency of the workers and lowering the negative impact of the tourist. This is why it is necessary to think through this model before you place your eco-touristic product on the market.

CONCLUSION

Since its first appearance in the early 80's, the eco-tourism has attracted many tourists to its cause. Ecotourism is a simple word, but a complex and often contradictory concept. With the emergence of the term ecotourism, occurring many definitions that try to define and explain this term from different aspects. There is no one universal definition for ecotourism. Although the goal of ecotourism are undisturbed and uncontaminated natural areas, however, all forms of travel to natural areas can not be called ecotourism. This tourism may be said to be true ecotourism if it addresses six principles.

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