

Ecotourism – An overview

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I am humbled to be invited to make this presentation because yesterday I learnt so much about the richness of hill tribe culture and I feel that it has offered me more than I can offer in advice on ecotourism.

Yesterday my family and I were ecotourists . We were taken on a journey full of interest. We watched weaving, embroidery and craft. I listened to the songs of the Lisu; I saw some majestic and inspiring scenery; I was impressed by the simplicity and functionality of the architecture; I saw buildings of mud, thatch, bamboo, timber and cement; I heard the stories of the people which really touched me; I saw people working in the fields, boys riding buffalo; but most of all I was privileged because I had excellent guides who could provide explanations to me about what I was seeing and who could answer my questions. What we had was just a wonderful, unforgettable ecotourism experience.

What we are now trying to do is to understand just how such ecotourism experiences in the future will help not just those who experience it but also the hill tribe who made such a rich and memorable experience possible.

Ecotourism is the fastest growing section of what is now the world's largest industry and which has been the fastest growing industry over the last 50 years.

Different Perspectives on Tourism

Tourism delivers a great deal of economic benefits but many of the benefits are invisible. While we can see the benefits to those who provide the hospitality and catering and the direct services and to those who sell the souvenirs, there are many more in other areas who make a contribution to tourism who are not easily recognized. The suppliers of food and services to all of the above, the transport sector delivers fuel and supplies, the motor industry, insurance, bankers and the list goes on.

There are several different perspectives of tourism and ecotourism.

1. Governments and economists: They want to boost the economy in general. They recognize the value of the tourist industry and just want it to keep growing. Because many of the people who benefit from tourism are not recognized, they are not usually particular about who are the winners and who are the losers as long as the overall economy grows as a result.

2. Those who supply the ecotourism resources: These include the National Parks and the managers and the people who add new cultural dimensions. They want to be the beneficiaries but this does not always happen. In the area I come from while National Parks attract lots of people and make a huge contribution to the tourist

industry, they are not properly rewarded by the Government to help them be better managed. I have also had some ecotourism experience in five continents but although it is almost always the ethnic minorities who add the most cultural interest to ecotourism, rarely do they fully benefit either.

3. The tourist operators: These are the people who most want to capitalize on the ecotourism resource for their own profit. They want to be the principal beneficiaries also but they usually achieve that objective. They manouvre to ensure they do. They have even changed the definition of "ecotourism" until it has become unrecognizable. I have seen almost every tour on Fraser Island advertised as an "ecotour" but rarely do those running them do so with the idea of protecting the environment. However, there are some very committed ecotour operators who are doing much to try to protect the environment. *GO BUSH Safaris* is trying to set a standard in this regard.

4. Environmentalists: They see ecotourism as a means to protect the environment. They expect that ecotourism to be a sustainable industry which will take advantage of natural areas to attract people as an alternative to destroying or damaging those natural areas through other industries such as the mining, agricultural or timber industries. They rarely see their objective met either because the tour operators are more committed to making profits than they are to ensuring that their impact on the environment is sustainable. They are the watchdogs on ecotourism trying to make governments ensure that sustainable standards are enforced.

5. Ecotourists themselves: Mostly they are on the side of the environmentalists but sometimes they don't have the option of choosing a tour operator who practices sustainability. There are several characteristics of ecotourists which I shall examine later. The most important thing to remember is that ecotourists want to experience natural areas and different cultures. They also want not to just look at a natural area or a different culture, they want to learn as much as they can about it and they want people to explain more so that they can get the best appreciation.

Maximizing Benefits Locally

The latter point is important to remember because the longer a tourist stays in an area, the more the local economy benefits. For example, if a tourist spends 15 days in Thailand the Thai economy benefits but this may not help the hill tribe village, but every full tourists day spent in a hill tribe village adds something to the local economy. It will be much greater if the actually stay in the village even than in Chiang Rai.

Therefore one of the objectives of this workshop should be how to change 20 minute tourist visits to your village into true ecotourists. 50 full day tourists will leave behind much more money than 200 20 minute tourists. In addition to getting economic benefits from these longer stays there will be other more lasting benefits — building friendships, gaining new ideas and helpful information and even people to help the villages politically.

An ecotourist profile

Ecotourists are articulate, assertive and well educated. They demand quality experiences. They generally come from the middle classes of society, (rarely from the upper class) because they have a reasonable disposable income and are prepared to travel. They tend to be older. Almost all ecotourists on my safaris are over 50 years of age. This is because they no longer have to worry about dependent children. Because they are usually quite senior, they are usually influential people who are well connected. Also because they come from an older age group there will usually be more women than men. I expect to have between 60 and 70% women on most of my ecotours.

Ecotourists tend to travel on economy (preferably discount) and to use clean but private 2 or 3 star accommodation. (While ecotourists are prepared to spend a lot of money on an environmental experience, they are reluctant to spend too much on buying a bed for the night.) While they don't want 5 star accommodation, they are prepared to pay to enjoy a 5 star environmental experience.

Amongst international ecotourists, most will come from northern Europe and North America rather than from southern Europe or Latin America. many Australians are also keen to experience ecotourism.

Another attribute is that ecotourists are usually very keen to protect the environment. They demand environmental responsibility and are critical of tour operators who do not have good standards.

When they are planning their trips ecotourists have many questions. They spend time researching destinations they might explore. They want to be informed on the best times to visit any particular site and what are the trade-offs going there at other times. They also want to know how long should they allow to get the best quality experience.

Ecotourism Resources

There are many factors which attract ecotourists. It is important to recognize them and identify all potential ecotourism resources which can be used as a basis for extending the time ecotourists spend with you. Most ecotourists do not specialize but they are interested in all aspects of the environment and interesting cultures. They don't seek to become experts but they do want to be well informed.

Because ecotourists are generally well educated most groups contain some people who are able to help the guides inform the group on some topics. As a tour guide, I have learnt more from some of the people I have taken than I knew before I started.

The following are just some of the many topics which interest ecotourists:

Plants: They are interested in all sorts of plants from the largest to the smallest and they want to know what makes them special. I have seen people walk through deep mud to explore mangroves because the explanations of how productive mangroves were in providing enough food per hectare to produce 600 tonnes of prawns made them more interesting as well as how the plants could survive in sea water. I have seen people spend a lot of time examining a small plant when they discovered that it was living off insects which it trapped in its foliage or other plants which trapped bacteria in their roots.

Animals: Animals are always interesting. However while large animals such as elephants and tigers can be fascinating if you can make people understand they can be just as interested in earthworms or spiders. I have seen people out at night shining torches into the holes of deadly spiders to see how they trapped their prey. I have watched people spend time putting their ear to trees to listen to the native bees inside.

Geology: I have had people join safaris just to see extinct volcanoes or to go to caves. People are interested in soils and what makes them different. They are fascinated by erosion and other factors which help shape the surface of the earth such as glaciers. They are interested in the different kind of rocks and what makes them different.

Spectacular features: The attraction of spectacular features such as waterfalls, lakes grand forests, rocky headlands, great displays of wildflowers, coral reefs, places where interesting animals are likely to be seen and majestic mountain scenery attract all tourists including ecotourists. The main difference is that ecotourists want to enjoy such attractions without too many others present if they can manage it. To this end I have seen people go out before daylight so they could be at such places when nobody else was around. I have had to organize my itineraries to visit such places to avoid the busiest times when there are likely to be crowds.

History: Ecotourists are interested in history. I have filled a whole safari with people who wanted to visit the centenary of a very significant historical event which occurred in this place. Often the story of a place is more important as the place is to see but people have to see the place to understand the setting for the story.

Culture: There are many aspects of culture which interest ecotourists. Firstly the more different the culture is from their own the more interested they are.

Since most come from a western culture they are not interested as much into seeing how other westerners live. However, they are extremely interested in authentic living traditional culture such as represented by the Australian Aborigines and the Thai hill tribes.

The aspects eco-tourists who have travelled with me find most interesting are:

- customs and rituals
- religion (Since religion plays a big part in most people's lives, ecotourists are very curious when they encounter religions which differ from their own).
- traditional art and crafts such as weaving, jewelry making etc.
- ceremonies (The Balinese attract many hundreds of people to their cremation ceremonies)
- Traditional music and dance (particularly when it uses traditional instruments such as the didgeridoo or the Lisu pipe organ)
- traditional medicine
- traditional architecture and building
- traditional dress
- traditional lifestyle generally from the forms of agriculture to the diet and style of cooking

Good information — The key factor

Ecotourists want quality explanations. They want clear and informative answers to their questions on so many topics from the geology to the history to almost any aspect of the environment and culture they encounter. Because they are usually well educated they can tell when they are not getting good information.

Apart from the destinations providing quality information is the key factor to ecotourism. Ecotourists are prepared to endure a great deal of discomfort to explore areas if the subjects can be made interesting.

The more that it explained and the better the explanations, the more time they will spend exploring. Ecotourists don't want to be rushed. They prefer fewer stops with more quality time at each. They want to watch the sunsets. They want to be assured that they will get adequate, well planned quality-time. This is an important factor to remember in converting 20 minute tourists to people who will stay longer in your village.

There are many ways of providing information. Apart from having a guide provide explanations, signs can provide a lot of information. Signs in other languages can also help overcome many language problems with foreign ecotourists.

Conclusion

Ecotourism has the capacity to deliver a lot of economic benefits to traditional cultures. However whether those benefits are realized depends on how ell the ecotourism is managed. To get the greatest local benefits requires careful management to maximize the time which the ecotourists spend locally. Having a good resource to attract them is a good start. However as well as marketing that resource and making sure that it is well known, it also requires management skills to extend their stay in the village. Most of this should be based around providing information.