

ECOTOURISM IN THE EYES OF THE BEHOLDER
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Abstract: Ecotourism is very much in vogue and widely contested and debated. Understanding ecotourism and its impacts is subjective and depends on one's perspective whether it is a genuine approach for sustainable development of a destination or a marketing ploy. Past interpretations place the concept on a spectrum of opinions offering both positive and negative conclusions and indicating lack of clarity of what ecotourism is and how it can be operationalised. Early studies neglected the negative aspects of this form of tourism, viewing it as a panacea for the ills of mass tourism. More recently, our attention has been drawn to the need for the protection of the natural and social environments as well as ecotourism's contribution to the economic development in a more sustainable way. The debate on sustainable ecotourism is still ongoing and its complexities are now being recognised. The aim of this conceptual paper is to identify the main differential characteristics of ecotourism. In so doing, it looks at past studies attempting to distinguish ecotourism from other forms of tourism, and explores the relationship between ecotourism and sustainability, often taken for granted. The paper argues that positive expectations associated with ecotourism depend on how its operationalisation and development are planned and implemented.

Keywords: Ecotourism, ethical planning, sustainable development, ecotourism operationalisation, tourism impacts, overtourism, extractive industry

Introduction

Ecotourism is often used as an economic and cultural diversification tool most commonly applied in the developing destinations as a means to protect ecosystems, preserve local cultures, and spur economic development, and is often positioned as an alternative to mass tourism. It has also been applied in mass destinations like Crete as a technocratic solution for product diversification in a more sustainable way. The debate on sustainable tourism development usually focuses on small-scale tourism practices, such as rural tourism or ecotourism, inappropriately referred to as 'alternative' tourism, judging by the problems they also create. Mature destinations, such as Crete, Greece are a classic example of inappropriate environmental practices and of disregard for the principles of sustainability. However, the restructuring processes in traditional destinations led to a more complex reality in which sustainability has become an unavoidable reference, both as a competitiveness factor and as a growing social demand (Coccosis, 2001; Saatsakis, Bakir, and Wickens, 2018; Saatsakis and Papas, 2006; Spilanis and Vayanni, 2003; Terkenli, 2005; Tsartas, 2003).

The rapid and uncontrolled increase of tourist arrivals has produced major negative impacts on the natural and built environment. In many cases, the phenomenon is so intense that, in combination with the low quality of services, it contributes to the continuous degradation of the tourist product and the reduction of profits for host communities and for the national economy. If this trend continues, the sustainability of the tourism industry, including ecotourism, is uncertain (Butler, 2017; Hunt et al., 2015; Weaver, 2016).

The emergence of new tourism destinations has increased the competition among existing mass tourism destinations catering for sun, sea and sand (3Ss). There has also been an increased differentiation of tourist demand and a trend to new forms of active, special interest tourism,

such as, ecotourism and cultural tourism. These forms of tourism are based on the unique characteristics and resources of each area. In the last two decades the growth of environmental concern and policies has also encouraged the increase in environmental friendly products and services. The terms 'sustainability' and 'sustainable tourism' are now widely used in the literature and in most development programmes, even though there is much confusion surrounding the interpretation of these concepts (Butler, 2017; Liu, 2003).

The last decade has witnessed a growing recognition of the importance of the sustainability imperative in tourism. The emerging view is that tourism can no longer be viewed as a commercial activity that has no significant impact on the natural and socio-cultural environment in which it is situated. Instead tourism is increasingly regarded as an extractive industrial activity which operates by appropriating environmental resources and transforming them for sale in consumer markets. Neglect of conservation and quality of life issues threatens the very basis of local populations and the viable and sustainable tourism industry (Anderson, Bakir & Wickens, 2014; Wearing, 2001).

The purpose of sustainable tourism development is to respond to the failures of past forms of tourism development (Buckley, 2012; Gladstone, Curley and Shokri, 2013; Tang, 2015). Whether mass or alternative, all forms of tourism cause some form of alteration of the environment, as tourism is inextricably linked to, and dependent on the use of resources of a destination. However, carefully managed ecotourism encourages an understanding of the impacts of tourism on the natural, cultural and human environments (Sharpley, 2006; Stronza, 2007). In its most general sense, alternative tourism can be broadly defined as a form of tourism that sets out to be consistent with natural and social values which allows both host and guests to enjoy positive and worthwhile interactions and shared experiences. Ecotourism is thus a responsible form of travel to natural areas which conserves the environment and sustains the wellbeing of the local people (Anderson et al., 2014). However, such positive expectations depend on how development is planned and implemented. The aim of this conceptual paper is to identify the main differential characteristics of ecotourism. In what follows, past studies are examined attempting to distinguish ecotourism from other forms of tourism and explores the relationship between ecotourism and sustainability.

Past Studies: Ecotourism and its Main Differential Characteristics

Ecotourism is a fast-growing segment of tourism; often conceptualised as an alternative to mass tourism (Fennel, 2003, 2014). It is seen as a panacea for the protection of nature by some authors (See Anderson et al., 2014), whereas others view any kind of tourism as a threat (e.g., Nygard & Uthardt, 2011), arguing that the revenues derived from ecotourism are too insignificant for supporting conservation on a large scale. It has been viewed as travel to natural areas which conserves the environment and improves the welfare of local people (Cater, 1994; 2009). It is claimed that it is concerned with natural beauty, geology, flora and fauna of a destination along with its indigenous cultures (Fennel, 2003, 2014; Weaver, 2001).

Past studies suggest that one of the reasons for the increasing demand for ecotourism is the influence of environmentalism of the past three decades in response to the negative environmental, economic and socio-cultural impacts of overtourism. There is concrete evidence to suggest that consumers have shifted away from mass tourism towards more environmentally friendly experiences that are more individualistic and enriching (Holden, 2003; Mihalic, 2000; Sharpley, 2006). The public is becoming more aware of threatening environmental trends such as global warming, ozone depletion, pesticide contamination, overpopulation, mass migration, global trade, and the deforestation of the rainforests. For instance, the media and the environmentalists have drawn the public's attention to the seriousness of these issues through

their regular coverage and commentaries. The efforts towards environmental protection have also been supported by themed publications such as the Brundtland report (1991) together with several governmental reports in conjunction with the eagerness to achieve sustainable development by any means, and the potential employment opportunities in natural areas. Governments have firmly placed the environment on their international agenda by undertaking more environmentally friendly initiatives (e.g., The Paris Agreement, UNFCCC, 2016). Furthermore, environmental proponents, notably David Attenborough, have documented the fragility of the natural world raising awareness about the gravity of environmental degradation and climate change, sending a message of the challenges that we have created and the desperate need for acting now.

Four decades ago ecotourism was regarded as a small-scale niche product which was a specialized form of nature-based or adventure tourism (Lindberg et al., 1998). Since then ecotourism became a popular notion featuring in studies with a variety of definitions, applications and evaluations, based on the assumptions that ecotourism is a 'politically correct form of mass tourism'. However, since the concept first emerged, it has been seen as a saviour for the environment, but it has also been arguably viewed as a marketing ploy (Saatsakis, 2018; Saatsakis, Bakir & Wickens, 2018). The concept has been operationalised with the purpose of increasing tourism traffic and economic impacts. There is little doubt that ecotourism is increasingly becoming a significant source of revenue for the international tourism industry and governments. In fact, the relevance of ecotourism as an emerging market can be exemplified by the fact that in 2000 the United Nations declared that 2002 was to be the 'International Year of Ecotourism'. The main purpose of this and subsequent events was to be the setting of an agenda and a set of recommendations for the development of tourism activities in the context of sustainable development (see, UNSDG, 2017).

The grounds on which ecotourism operates are claimed to be alternative forms of tourism or special interest travel and the associated products generated from these segments. A debate exists among researchers on whether the growth of tourism, including ecotourism, is driven by supply or by demand. Some analysts consider the growth of ecotourism as being supply led (e.g., Saatsakis, 2018). However, others argue that ecotourism can also be demand driven (e.g., Perkins & Grace, 2014). Analysis of past studies adopting the supply led view of ecotourism suggests that ecotourism is a marketing ploy. A demand led understanding of ecotourism, on the other hand, favours the view of ecotourism as a remedy to the ills of mass tourism and hence its understanding as a sustainable development.

Many scholars have written about the challenges of conceptualising ecotourism. As such, the concept has acquired a broad range of meanings that impedes its operationalisation as an instrument of environmental management. The major challenge for scholars is how to translate the concept of ecotourism into relevant and usable principles and criteria. However, there is a broad agreement amongst thinkers that ecotourism is primarily related to nature with a secondary cultural component. It promises an appreciation of the natural environment and activities which are perceived as being benign. There is a view which indicates that the environmental, economic and social aspects should be all given equal weight, recognizing their interdependence and integrated nature (Anderson, et al., 2014). Sustainability is used as a blueprint to achieve a better and more sustainable future for everyone while preserving environmental and socio-cultural systems (Saatsakis, 2018). Conceptualised as a nature- and culture-based tourism, ecotourism embodies environmental responsibilities including fostering a conservation ethic among the local community and hence distinguishing it from other forms of tourism. This key defining characteristic makes ecotourism distinct from other tourism types, as the tourists' experience is nature-based, ecologically sustainable, environmentally educational, locally beneficial and participatory. The interrelationship between the natural and

the social environments within ecotourism adds an important ethical dimension which makes it distinct.

In contrast, critics argue that ecotourism could be perceived as ideologically biased (Cater, 2006). Tourists often demand the exclusivity of the visited ecotourism destinations and the comforts of the perceived authenticity found in the nature of the environmental bubbles associated with it. Often described as an elitist form of tourism, critics point out that ecotourism destinations are promoted as 'exclusive' nature resorts where the indigenous population is excluded, and where few benefits are accrued for the protection of the local environment. It is further argued that ecotourism often possesses anti-democratic tendencies and has questionable sustainable nature as it lacks repeat visitations and the active support of national political planning (Anderson et al., 2014).

Conceptualised as visiting scenery, protected areas, wild plants, and wildlife, ecotourism is currently one of the most popular and fast-growing segments of the tourism industry, generating over \$20 billion in economic activity and representing 5% to 10% of the overall travel markets. The growth rates for ecotourism are estimated to vary between 10% and 30% annually compared to 4% for tourism overall (Duffy, 2006; Mehmetoglu, 2008; Saatsakis, 2018; UNWTO, 2004).

Ecotourism is thus engulfed by fuzziness and ambiguity, encompassing education, environmental awareness, cultural revitalisation, and rural development (Burns, 2005; Burns & Barrie, 2005; Saatsakis, 2018). Ecotourism attributes that have been identified in past studies include: empowerment, local participation, education and environmental learning, ethical development, sustainability, conservation, an interest in nature and nature-based activities, the provision of long-term benefits for locals, and environmental appreciation (Saatsakis, 2018).

Our analysis shows that ecotourism viewed as a wide spectrum of opinions with a variety of understandings, each attempting to define it from a specific stance or associated with a specific product, has led to its ambiguity and fuzziness (Saatsakis et al., 2018). Thus, it is a complex and synergistic set of social, ecological, and economic dimensions that represent a common 'main idea' (Bjork, 2000; Donohoe and Needham, 2006; Weaver, 2005). This main idea is based on the view that ecotourism acts as both an economic and policy tool for achieving sustainable development (Fennell, 2002; Lai and Shafer, 2005; Williams, 2006). In addition, in terms of the environmental debate, ecotourism fits well with notions of 'sustainability-lite', where sustainable development can be achieved within existing political, economic and social structures and through the operation of the market. The absence of a clear definition and the vagaries and ambiguities that surround the term make it, as some would argue, almost meaningless as it is used indiscriminately to describe anything related to nature or unrelated to conventional tourism. Unsurprisingly, terms such as "hard" vs. "soft", "deep" vs. "shallow", or "active" versus "passive" ecotourism are thus abound in the literature (Orams, 1995; Stem, Lassole, Lee, and Deshler, 2003; Saatsakis, 2018). A more careful consideration of ecotourism should therefore include both: *supply factors* (nature and resilience of resources, cultural or local community preferences, types of accommodation) and *demand factors* (types of activities and experiences; degree of interest in natural or cultural resources; degree of physical effort) (Anderson et al., 2014). For instance, Saatsakis et al. (2018), pointing to the supply and demand side of ecotourism, argue that as an industry it must be concerned with the visitors' experience, host community, the resource base, and tour operators. They also add that because ecotourism involves several quite different social and ecological aspects, it is important to distinguish between these in clarifying the concept.

These authors recognise that understanding ecotourism as a continuum or spectrum has a number of challenges and implications for its operationalisation for the purposes of product development and marketing. The difficulty for selecting a single definition is in the intrinsic nature of ecotourism, being a complex, interdisciplinary and multi-sectoral phenomenon. This paper acknowledges that ecotourism is an intellectual concept, socially constructed to question whether the planning, development and management of tourism can be undertaken in a more sustainable way. Ecotourism offers economic benefits through natural resources preservation, providing potential benefits for both conservation and development (Anderson et al., 2014; Boo, 1993).

Planning and decision-making should involve local populations for ecotourism to succeed (Saatsakis, 2018). It requires planning which balances economic, social and environmental goals. Ecotourism demands a managed approach by the host country or region which commits itself to establishing and maintaining the sites with the participation of local residents, marketing them appropriately, enforcing regulations, and using the proceeds of the enterprise to fund the area's land management as well as community development. The key characteristic of ecotourism is characterized by small scale development planned to attract tourists to natural environments that are unique and accessible, use its revenue to achieve nature conservation and produce employment and entrepreneurial opportunities for the host community.

Planning and development must start with the people first, as it is from this basis that the industry will flourish, and their involvement will allow them to avoid many of the pitfalls already associated with conventional mass tourism (Saatsakis, 2018). Hence, ecotourism would not become just an 'industry' operated in the natural environment but an experience that people have that affects their attitudes, values and actions. It thus involves environmental education, fostering of attitudes and behaviour that is contributing to maintaining natural environments, and empowerment of host communities. Ecotourism development can therefore be said to include at least three key dimensions: sustainability, conservation and empowerment of host communities. Its perceived potential as an effective tool for sustainable development is the main reason why destinations are now embracing it and including it in their economic development and conservation strategies (Saatsakis, 2018; Stem et al., 2003). As we have been reminded by Brundtland (1991), sustainable development should always meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

Conclusion

Ecotourism is one of the most advocated concepts in the tourism literature, yet there remains considerable debate on what the meaning is, or what should be. There is a broad set of ecotourism attributes that are widely promoted, including; environmental conservation and education, cultural preservation and economic benefits. A careful examination of the theoretical discourse shows that the concept of ecotourism is seen as a magical solution to all tourism problems; economic development, environmental conservation, cultural preservation. The discourse suggests that ecotourism is an intellectually attractive term, often presented as a responsible form of travel; yet others view it as a marketing ploy to expand the tourism market. This paper has argued that ecotourism is highly contentious, and the debate is still ongoing on whether it can deliver the expected economic and environmental benefits to indigenous communities and destinations. As a complex concept, ecotourism remains much debated and contested. Lack of clarity of what ecotourism is has led to its fuzziness and undermined its operationalisation.

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