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THE ECOTOURISM PRINCIPLE - PRACTICE DIVIDE: FACTORS THAT LIMIT THE APPLICABILITY OF ECOTOURISM PRINCIPLES INTO PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT

As countries continue to develop their tourism industries, it produces significant impact on resources, economies, and social systems. Despite the acceptance of evidence of damaging effects that tourism has on the environment, tourists, tourism businesses, governments, destination local communities, and other stakeholder groups struggle with how to achieve a reasonable amount of sustainability. To conserve these critical components of tourism, it requires long term planning and the incorporation of sustainable practices that ecotourism principles can offer. While there is no dearth of principles, theories, and frameworks in ecotourism, it is questionable to what extent all these help the practitioners. The aim of this paper is to explore the root causes of such reduced applicability and to propose some solutions to bridge the divide.

KEYWORDS: ECOTOURISM. SUSTAINABILITY. CONTRADICTIONS. COMMODIFICATION. CULTURE. NATURE. THEORY. PRACTICE. APPLICABILITY.

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INTRODUCTION

Travel and tourism, as of 2017, accounts for 10.4% of global GDP and 313 million jobs (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2018). The tourism industry is one of the largest economic sectors globally as it creates employment opportunities, drives exports, and generates revenue across the world. While this industry offers substantial benefits, there are also disadvantages including negative impacts to the environment. Tourism is dependent on factors such as political stability, safety, ease of transportation, government approval, and the economy. However, "the environment, be it predominantly natural or largely human made, is one of the most basic resources for tourism and a core element of tourism products" (Williams & Lew, 2015, p. 109).

As the negative impact of tourism on the environment has become more widely researched, it has influenced tourists to be more responsible when traveling, it has driven individuals to visit destinations before they are destroyed, and it has motivated the tourism industry to find ways to protect the resources they have; thus, the birth of ecotourism. Interestingly, there has been evidence of ecotourism dating back to the 18th century, before there was a term for it. According to Ballantyne and Packer (2013), "The early geographers who toured the world in search of new lands, species and cultures were ecotourists…The establishment of National Parks – Yellowstone in the US in 1872 and Banff in Canada in 1885 – is further evidence of the early interest in nature tourism…African wildlife safaris and Himalayan treks in the 1960s and 1970s were also part of this trend" (p. 15). While this may be, over time ecotourism has matured and has attempted to redefine people's ideas and sense of responsibility to the environment.

The definition of ecotourism was first recorded by the Oxford English Dictionary in 1982 and is currently defined as "tourism directed towards exotic, often threatened, natural environments, intended to support conservation efforts and observe wildlife" (Ecotourism, n.d.). However, according to Honey (2008), "ecotourism, properly

understood, goes further, striving to respect and benefit protected areas as well as the people living around or on these lands" (p. 3).

This suggests that not only is the environmental importance of ecotourism growing, but so is social importance as global inequality continues to climb. According to Oxfam International (2016, p.2) "the richest 1% now have more wealth than the rest of the world combined, and just 62 individuals had the same wealth as 3.6 billion people – the bottom half of humanity". Simply put, the rich are getting richer, while the poor are getting poorer. With this in mind, and as damage from climate change continues to plague this planet, it is critical the tourism industry address its contribution to the destruction of lands and communities by developing and implementing strategies to preserve what is left of our environment and to better the lives of people who live in tourist destinations.

More positively, it does appear ecotourism is outpacing the growth of the tourism industry as a whole with the help of travelers and businesses alike. There have been several surveys and studies showing continual interest in ecotourism. In 2015, Charuta reported on a survey conducted by Tourism Cares, Good Travels: The Philanthropic Profile of the American Traveler. Of 2,551 respondents, 55% said that they volunteered or donated to a destination they had visited for leisure in the last two years. In 2017, the NYU School of Professional Studies and the Family Travel Association conducted a study that found 49% of families claimed visiting new places and exploring as the main reason for wanting to travel. The study also found that respondents greatly value travel in their family lives, as exemplified by the high scores for 'I want to raise my children so they love to travel' and 'Travel is an essential part of our well-being'. A 2015 Nielsen study reported "66% percent of global consumers say they're willing to pay more for sustainable brands—up 55% from 2014. Seventy-three percent of global millennials are willing to pay extra for sustainable offerings—up from 50% in 2014" ("Consumer-Goods' Brands," 2015, para.1). With a proven desire for ecotourism, and statistics showing progress in the right direction, why is it the tourism industry hasn't been able to achieve higher levels of sustainability through identified ecotourism principles?

THE BACKGROUND

The idea of ecotourism has significantly evolved since its inception in the mid-sixties. Despite being a recognized form of tourism by the mid-eighties, destinations were still limited and most ecotourists were those associated with conservation organizations, were scientists, or were those working in the field (Fennel, 2008). In addition, to participate in ecotourism during that time, one had to be financially well-off in order to afford the necessary gear and to take frequent, extended trips (Fennel, 2008). In the mid-eighties, as sustainability was being recognized as a critical action and people's curiosity and sense of obligation began to peak, ecotourism began to flourish, and it didn't take long before it became more accessible to everyone. However, "the growth in ecotourism supply and demand over such a relatively short period of time has been accompanied by some very serious philosophical and practical inconsistencies that continue to plague ecotourism in study and practice" (Fennel, 2008, p.17).

According to a 2015 World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC) study, "The next 20 years will be characterized by our sector fully integrating climate change and related issues into business strategy, supporting the global transition to a low carbon economy, strengthening resilience at a local level against climate risks, promoting the value of responsible travel, and greening entire supply chains" (p. 5). There is certainly a lot of work left to be done, but the industry is the closest it has ever been to attaining a higher level of sustainability. This is why the identification of ecotourism principles and the understanding of their limitations are important. This understanding may create opportunity for new, creative methods of attaining sustainability and may influence which principles are used as the standard for ecotourism. Continued research surrounding ecotourism may eliminate the debate over definition and therefore provide hard guidelines corporations must follow in order to be considered a reliable ecotourism business. With an increase in cooperation and dedication from some global leaders to address climate challenges, the tourism industry is strongly positioned to find

resolutions to the problems it faces. If solutions can be applied successfully, the tourism industry will continue to grow. If not, the industry will likely suffer.

HISTORY OF ECOTOURISM

Is commonly accepted that ecotourism is an effective tool for sustainability and that sustainability continues to be an important factor for travel. Sustainable tourism is critical to the continued enjoyment of travelers as natural resources are not limitless and, in many instances, once damage has been done to the environment, it cannot be repaired.

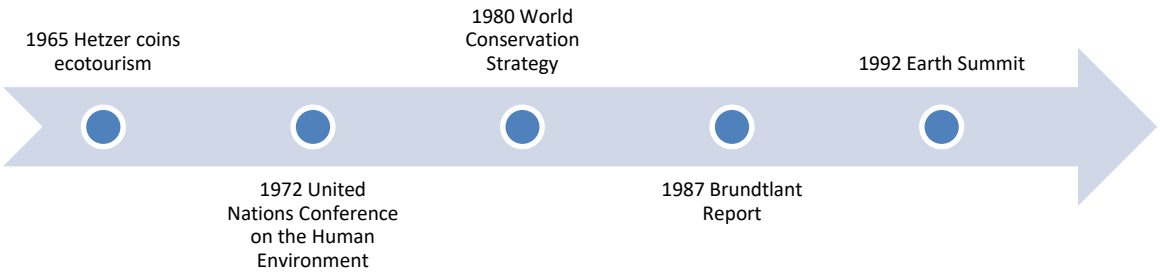

Figure 1. Historical timeline of ecotourism.

In 1967, President Johnson reported on the negative impact heavy travel to US national parks had on the landscape. At that time, Yosemite National Park was already luring 1.7 million visitors a year (Johnson, 1967) and other popular destinations were experiencing similar negative effects. The idea of sustainability generated from the recognition that the environment needed some amount of protection from human interference. Measures needed to combat the degradation of the environment started during this time (refer to Figure 1 for this chapter). However, June 5-16, 1972 served as a major turning point when the United Nations held its first conference on international environmental issues in Stockholm, Sweden (Handl, n.d.). This conference set an example for environmental politics and later helped shape the World Conservation

Strategy, a guide prioritizing necessary conservation actions (IUCN, 1980). The World Conservation Strategy is considered one of the most influential documents of the 20th century for nature conservation and was one of the first official documents to introduce the concept of sustainable development. In 1987, shortly after the World Conservation Strategy was published, the Brundtland Report "Our Common Future" was distributed. This report included a global agenda for change that included long term environmental strategies, recommendations for greater cooperation among developing countries and between countries at different stages of economic and social development, ideas for how the international community can deal more effectively with environment concerns, and defining shared perceptions of long-term environmental issues and the appropriate efforts needed to deal successfully with the problems of protecting and enhancing the environment (Brundtland Report, 1987). And though it has been greatly criticized, it is still one of the most cited sources on the topic of sustainability.

In 1992, the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), also known as the Earth Summit, was held in Rio de Janeiro (United Nations, 1997). This conference was unprecedented in both size and agenda. "The summit's message – that nothing less than a transformation of our attitudes and behavior would bring about the necessary changes – was transmitted by almost 10,000 on-site journalists and heard by millions around the world" (United Nations, 1997, para.2). In the years that followed, numerous organizations were formed dedicated to both tourism and sustainability. They helped identify how the tourism industry could contribute to sustainable development and reinforced the responsibility everyone had to ensuring its success.

If one were to exclude the exploration of early geographers from ecotourism, then the argument could be made that Claus-Dieter (Nicolas) Hetzer coined the term and developed the first principles of ecotourism. In 1965, well ahead of research on sustainable development, he published an article that was a re-think in culture, education, and tourism (Ballantyne & Packer, 2013). Hetzer would go on to ultimately define 'ecotourism' and apply what some consider the first set of ecotourism principles. Following this, he hosted two, well attended workshops in 1970 and 1971 to discuss the

need for ecotourism and throughout the 70's, he led tours through the Yucatan. While many credit Hetzer with the birth of ecotourism, it should be noted that Hector Ceballos-Lascurain has been extremely vocal in his claims that he coined the term ecotourism many years later in 1983. In a 2008 interview, Ceballos-Lascurain discusses his excitement at celebrating ecotourism's 25-year anniversary while giving himself credit for coining the term and one forum participant even refers to him as the 'Father of Ecotourism' (Mader, 2008). He continues work in the field today.

In the 1980's global tourism was expanding due to increasing interest in foreign destinations, the environment, and the increasing ease of transportation. When these collided, ecotourism began to boom and has continued to gain popularity over past decades while evolving in its message and influence. Numerous responsible travel organizations have formed such as the Global Ecotourism Network, The International Ecotourism Society, the United Nations World Tourism Organization, and likely the most influential, the Center for Responsible Travel (CREST). CREST was founded in 2003 by Dr. Martha Honey (Love, 2014), one of the most educated and well-respected experts in the ecotourism field. What began as a concept has evolved into a dedicated area of study at colleges and universities, a career path within tourism, and a booming industry for businesses. Ecotourism developed organically from sustainability and it is easy to understand why given how closely they align and even overlap.

DEFINITIONS OF ECOTOURISM

"Few issues in the academic study of travel and tourism are as contentious, drawing divided and polarised lines of debate, as the concept of ecotourism" (Higham, 2007, p.2). Often, ecotourism is categorized with the likes of nature, wildlife, or adventure tourism while some will argue it is in fact its own sector. Ecotourism is an alternative form of tourism popular among ethical and mindful travelers wanting to make an impact. It involves traveling to natural areas where individuals interact with the environment in an effort to reduce damaging effects conventional tourism can have and often involves working to preserve environmental resources. Individuals are

educated about local culture and submerge themselves in it. In many cases, travelers participate in activities that will benefit local communities. These activities include, but are not limited to, recycling programs, water conservation efforts, energy efficiency programs, and animal tracking, monitoring, and data gathering. While this leaves the traveler with a sense of personal growth and satisfaction, their activities should also directly benefit the economy, boost employment, or empower local communities. Despite the benefits of ecotourism, it is a widely misunderstood concept. It is a popular debate among experts as to what can be considered authentic ecotourism and whether it delivers on its promises.

One of the most common criticisms of ecotourism is the lack of definition. While some experts believe the industry must move beyond defining ecotourism, others believe it is still critical for reasons such as identity, research, planning and development, product development, awareness, government support, sustainability, policy, and international reputation (Higham, 2007). Though formal definitions of ecotourism have existed for more than three decades, there is yet to be any agreement on its meaning and Wilson, Sagewan-Alli, and Calatayud (2014) maintain that "a universally accepted definition of the ecotourism concept still remains elusive" (p. 4). Revisiting Hetzer, he may have fashioned the first definition (1965) using four key principles; lowest possible impact to environment, respect for the host culture, increase benefits to local people, and increase tourist satisfaction. However, it is principles like these that often contribute to the difficulty of defining ecotourism.

The vagueness of ecotourism arises because the interpretation is dependent on the creator. Across numerous meanings, each contain different principles defining what ecotourism is; "a common theme emergent in these and other descriptions of ecotourism, is the tendency to incorporate a number of principles into the term, ranging from preservation to economic impacts" (Fennel, 2001, p. 403). Other principles include, but are not limited to, history, culture, archaeology, travel to natural areas, sustainability, and conservation. While each definition is unique, there have been a few studies conducted to prove consistent themes among meanings.

In 2001, Fennel shared the results of an analysis he conducted of 85 ecotourism definitions. The results of this analysis revealed five common principles among all definitions; reference to where ecotourism occurs, conservation, reference to culture, benefits to locals, and education. Of these principles, reference to where ecotourism occurs was cited in 62.4% of definitions, conservation was cited in 61.2% of definitions (expanding to cover preservation and protection), reference to culture was cited in 50.6% of definitions, benefits to locals was cited in 48.2% of definitions, and education was cited in 41.2% of definitions (Fennel, 2001). Donohoe and Needham, in 2006, revisited Fennell's analysis and conducted their own study examining 30 academic definitions and 12 Canadian private sector and government definitions. Their results determined six common principles; nature-based, preservation/conservation, education, sustainability, distribution of benefits, and ethics/responsibility/awareness (Donohoe & Needham, 2006). Not only did Donohoe and Needham's study support Fennel's analysis, but it also reaffirmed Hetzer's original definition and principles from over 40 years prior.

However, it is important ecotourism is defined "in order to foster robust and widely recognized industry standards (supply side) while also serving visitor interests in achieving the ecotourism experiences that they seek (demand side)" (Higham & Lück, 2002, p. 37). According to Postica and Cardoso (2014, p. 83) "There is no common accepted definition for ecotourism, which causes the lack of understanding of specific conditions under which it may be best promoted, managed and evaluated". Goodwin had made a similar point in 1996 when he discussed part of the reason for ecotourism's rapid growth was the use of the tag 'eco' on products and services which marketing used to promote responsible consumerism even if not a true 'eco' product. Honey (2008) echoes this sentiment writing "the tourism industry, including the travel press, has come to view "green travel" as a marketing tool to attract the growing number of environmentally and socially conscious travelers and to open new, unexploited destinations" (p. 19). Essentially, without a universal definition, businesses within the industry are free to endorse and operate as they see fit and at the deception of the consumer as these greenwashing practices can be detrimental to the environment.

KEY PRINCIPLES OF ECOTOURISM

As discussed, definitions of ecotourism tend to be linked to a set of principles. For as many different definitions that exist, there are likely as many sets of principles that are dependent on the person defining the term. Some of the most recognized sets of principles include those set forth by The International Ecotourism Society (TIES). TIES is a non-profit organization founded in 1990 with the goal of helping communities, individuals, and organizations promote and practice what they view are the principles of ecotourism (TIES, n.d.). TIES principles include: (1) minimize physical, social, behavioral, and psychological impacts; (2) build environmental and cultural awareness and respect; (3) provide positive experiences for both visitors and hosts; (4) provide direct financial benefits for conservation; (5) Generate financial benefits for both local people and private industry; (6) deliver memorable interpretative experiences to visitors that help raise sensitivity to host countries' political, environmental, and social climates; (7) design, construct and operate low-impact facilities; (8) recognize the rights and spiritual beliefs of the indigenous people in your community and work in partnership with them to create empowerment (TIES, n.d.).

It was from TIES developed list of principles that Wallace and Pierce (1996) developed their principles after an evaluation of ecotours and operators in Brazil. Their principles include: (1) minimizes negative impacts to the environment and to local people; (2) increases the awareness and understanding of the area's natural and cultural systems; (3) contributes to the conservation and management of legally-protected lands and other natural areas; (4) maximizes the early- and long-term participation of local people in the decision-making process; (5) directs economic and other benefits to local people; and (6) provide special opportunities for local people and tourism employees to utilize and visit natural areas.

In May of 2002, the World Ecotourism Summit was held with 1,200 delegates from 133 countries. From this summit came the Quebec Declaration of Ecotourism; "a new tool for the international development of this type of tourism – already in high

demand throughout the planet" (United Nations, 2002, para.1). The participation in the World Ecotourism Summit was extraordinary and the declaration offers its own set of principles which include: (1) contributes actively to the conservation of natural and cultural heritage; (2) includes local and indigenous communities in its planning, development and operation, and contributes to their well-being; (3) interprets the natural and cultural heritage to visitors; (4) encourages independent travelers, as well as organized tours for small size groups.

Hetzer, TIES, Wallace and Pierce, and the Quebec Declaration all bargain similar principles and only scratch the surface of the volume of principles that could exist. To make matters more complicated, experts will also argue authenticity based on the number of principles in effect during an 'eco' activity. Ceballos-Lascurain (2001) states that he believes in ecotourism and not in 'eco-purism', meaning the idea is to meet as many of the criteria as possible. However, Orams (1995) gauges the authenticity of ecotourism using his creation of the continuum of ecotourism paradigm. This includes two poles indicating either low human responsibility or high human responsibility. Orams suggests that all definitions and principles of ecotourism will fall somewhere on the continuum. Those that hold activities and travel to a higher standard of involvement such as conservation efforts or educational programs, would fall to high human responsibility. Those activities and travel that are broad and don't require much effort would fall to low human responsibility. The level of human responsibility determines whether the activity is truly ecotourism.

For this paper, Honey's principles of ecotourism will be a key basis for exploring the limitations of ecotourism principles in practice. Honey (2008) states seven principles for ecotourism: (1) involves travel to natural destinations; (2) minimizes impact; (3) builds environmental awareness; (4) provides direct financial benefit for conservation; (5) provides financial benefits and empowerment for local people; (6) respects local culture; (7) supports human rights and democratic movements. The first principle regarding travel to natural destinations refers to lands that are remote and usually protected. These lands can be inhabited or uninhabited. The second principle states the importance of ecotourism having minimal impact on the environment and

community. This not only includes executing sustainable practices, but also limiting the number of tourists in an area and limiting or monitoring their behaviors. Building environmental awareness is the third principle and is centered around the importance of education for the tourist, the tour operators, neighboring communities, and the general public.

The fourth principle is providing direct financial benefit for conservation. This is the idea that ecotourism helps to generate revenue that can be put back into the communities and into conservation efforts. For example, the fees charged to enter national parks would be considered a direct financial benefit for conservation as that money is often poured back into the parks for repairs, re-planting, etc. The fifth principle concerning the direct financial benefits and empowerment of local people is quite substantial. The local community must benefit from tourism in their regions and must receive tangible benefits such as paved roads, clean water, etc. This principle also boosts employment and provides opportunity for many locals to own and operate their own businesses. It is important for any successful tourism destination to have happy people surrounding it. The sixth principle is about respecting local culture. This includes tourists taking the time to learn about their host culture and being careful not to intrude. They should be careful not to allow their own culture to taint the area they are visiting. This is especially important for more remote areas where locals likely have very little experience with foreign visitors. Finally, the last principle concerns supporting human rights and democratic movements. Statutes of World Tourism Organization, 2009, states tourism contributes to "international understanding, peace, prosperity, and universal respect for and observance of human rights and fundamental freedom for all" (p. 3). However, while tourism often helps the economies of underdeveloped destinations, very little attention is paid to political climate unless it's a direct threat to the tourist. Just as ecotourists should educate themselves about local culture, they should educate themselves about the government and how politics shapes the area they are visiting. They need to be especially sensitive to movements, protest, and boycotts by locals who are looking for improved human rights.

LIMITATIONS OF ECOTOURISM PRINCIPLES IN PRACTICE

Between the large amounts of research surrounding sustainability and the great efforts the tourism industry has put into conservation and preservation, it would seem tourism should be one of the most sustainable global industries. Ecotourism has provided many sets of principles detailing what is necessary to achieve sustainability. However, the tourism industry struggles with putting these principles into practice due to larger, overarching limitations within the ecotourism concept.

LACK OF DEFINITION

Most literature points to the lack of a universal definition as the main reason ecotourism principles have limited influence and have not helped to attain the level of sustainability they are meant to. Before the industry can be expected to execute identified principles, there first needs to be a concrete definition to serve as the foundation for the ecotourism concept. As previously discussed, the lack of a definition allows businesses to manage, promote, and operate as they see fit. “Green travel is the current rage and has gone from a trend to a part of mainstream consumer and corporate culture. This increase in eco-friendly travel has some organizations worrying that the meaning of ‘ecotourism’ is being watered down and is simply used as a marketing tool to take advantage of increased demand in order to boost revenue” (Self, Self, & Haynes, 2010, p.115). Sirakaya, Sasidharan, and Sönmez (1999) echo this sentiment stating, “ecotourism may be viewed as just another “buzzword” that serves as a marketing tool and allows tourism providers to take advantage of the new generation of mass travelers in search of unexplored natural and cultural beauty in unusual and remote destinations” (p. 1).

ECOTOURISM AS A CONTRADICTORY CONCEPT

Another limitation of ecotourism principles in practice is that many experts find ecotourism to be self-contradictory. Traveling to a natural destination is the first principle in Honey's list. However, the transportation methods used to get to and around these destinations contributes greatly to CO2 emissions. Between transport, activities, and accommodations, the travel industry's contribution to global warming is estimated to be up to 12.5% (UNEP & UNWTO, 2012). Additionally, travel to natural destinations involves an influx of tourists to an area that is untainted. Ecotourism is meant to protect such areas, but promoting visitation defeats the purpose and defies the principle as it is no longer remote or natural. Not only are these destinations being overwhelmed by tourists, but there are local strains and disruptions that can be induced by catering to tourists (Belsky, 1999; West & Carrier, 2004).

Additionally, many principles outline traveling to remote, natural, pristine, or undisturbed areas. However, this discredits the ability to experience ecotourism in urban areas. For example, the following case study was conducted in New Zealand and shows positive results that urban areas can benefit from ecotourism. In 2000, Houston and Russel reported on their experience at the Oamaru Blue Penguin Colony. This ecotourism operation has two facilities for blue penguins. The first facility has a viewing center created for travelers to observe the blue penguins, particularly in the evening as they return to their nests each day. This facility also uses special lighting that allows humans to view the penguins while not harming the animals. The second facility is not public and there is no interaction between travelers and penguins. The study found that the introduction of humans in the penguin's area had no impact on their reproduction because of the careful measures put in place respecting the penguin's habitat. In fact, both facilities reported that the penguins flourished, and their populations continued to rise proving that when responsible, travelers can visit areas and have zero impact when participating in ecotourism activities (Houston & Russel, 2002).

The above case study also touches on the second principle in Honey's list which is dedicated to minimizing the impact tourists should have on these areas. Water

consumption by tourists can be quite extensive between irrigation, swimming pools, spas, and guest rooms. In addition, solid waste and pollutants in water waste increase with the rise in the number of tourists to an area (Pan, Gao, Hyunook, Kinjal, Si-Lu, & Pen-Chi, 2018). An increase in tourism also contributes to the destruction of habitat and the loss of biodiversity. This is none more evident than in the detrimental impact tourism has had on coral reef and rainforests as well as the introduction of alien species and the disturbance to wildlife (UNWTO, 2012). Further, there is substantial research that examines ways in which locals are dislocated and disadvantaged in order to accommodate ecotourists through parks, resorts, hotels, restaurants, etc. (Carrier & Macleod, 2005).

COMMODIFICATION OF CULTURE

Another principle associated with ecotourism is the respect of culture. "The process of cultural commodification, of reducing cultures to rituals and handicrafts for consumption, is widely criticized by scholars" (Dorsey, Steeves, & Porras, 2004, p.749). Some experts believe commodification is nothing more than the exploitation of a destination's culture, but more importantly, some believe it can create an inaccurate portrayal of the current culture. For example, in South Africa, tourists flock to the Kagga Kamma Nature Reserve to view bushmen, dressed in traditional garb, perform traditional song and dance. However, by evening, those bushmen have returned to their modern homes, wearing jeans and a t-shirt, and listen to contemporary radio (Dorsey, et al., 2004). In addition to natives 'exploiting' their own culture, ecotourism can also result in cultural borrowing or misappropriation by tourists (Dorsey, et al., 2004). Cultural misappropriation includes instances such as getting tattoos of significant tribal symbols, the widespread styling of hair into dreadlocks, or the excessive drinking and partying for Cinco de Mayo or St. Patrick's Day. While these examples show ignorance for culture, some experts argue that it fulfills yet another principle; direct financial benefit and prosperity, and the empowerment of local people. For the host country, it can lead to a

development of pride in its cultures and enable local communities to control their own development (Enright, 1992).

CERTIFICATION

Currently, there are no standards in which businesses are held when it comes to existing as an authentic 'eco' product or service, nor are there any consequences for greenwashing. To combat this, many ecotourism supporters advocate for certification in an effort to distinguish between true ecotourism and bogus products and companies. "Certification initiatives emerged as non-government, market-based interventions to promote sustainability by encouraging the preferential consumption of goods and services from companies that adhere to high social and environmental standards in their production" (Conroy, 2002, p. 109). While 'eco-certification' would influence the consumer to patronize authentic businesses, certification is not mandatory.

Ecotourism certification programs tend to be inclusive of various stakeholders and balance the interests of each. These stakeholders can include environmentalists, the tourism industry, host countries, host communities, consumers, and funding agencies. Most certification programs require implementation of standard sustainable practices but will also be focused toward local stakeholder and regional concerns (Honey, 2002). "Because of the environmental and/or cultural sensitivity of these areas, the underlying goal of ecotourism certification programs is more than harm reduction; it is to strive to have the business improve or at least have near-zero impact on the area in which it is located" (Honey, 2002, p.63).

Despite the good intentions of ecotourism certifications, some critics argue these programs would be dominated by advanced countries and transnational corporations, thus serving their interests before those of the countries they occupy. As a result, standards may be too low to provide adequate protection for the environment and too high for smaller businesses to meet, thus maintaining the inequality in ecotourism and sustainable practice between developed and underdeveloped countries (Kroshus Medina, 2005). In the 90's Belize began to promote itself as an ecotourism destination.

Kroshus Medina, starting in 1998 and spanning two years, held interviews with members of the Belize EcoTourism Association (BETA), Cayo Tour Guide Association (CTGA), and the Small Hotel Association (SHA), among others, asking individuals how they thought ecotourism should be defined and how their businesses were implementing ecotourism. In addition, 1400 residents nearest high-tourism areas were also interviewed to determine what benefits they received from ecotourism. BETA members, majorly made up of expatriates and foreign investors who developed a "code of ethics" related to ecotourism, indicated their businesses created jobs and stimulated productivity among other local businesses by using their products and services. However, while BETA saw themselves as active participants in ecotourism, other organizations such as SHA and CTGA viewed them as "big" business and accused them of ultimately working to avoid sharing tourists, and therefore money, with smaller businesses in the area. Medina's results found that smaller, native owned businesses in Belize are concerned with larger businesses setting the majority of regulations, that Belizeans are being excluded from setting standards, that these two types of businesses do not share the same challenges, and they question who really benefits from this ecotourism. They discount long-term foreign residents as contributors to ecotourism citing that they pursue their own self-interests rather than the greater good of Belize and even go so far as to question whether those in BETA should educate tourists about Belizean culture (Kroshus Medina, 2005). This case study supports critic's concerns about dominance in ecotourism through definition, setting principles, and certification.

However, what's concerning is that it appears the authenticity of businesses don't have much effect on the consumer's decision to support them. Many travelers are easily convinced a business is 'eco-friendly' and don't do significant research to confirm this. It's easy to see how they are deceived. Nature tourism and ecotourism are very similar to one another; some argue ecotourism is simply a subset of nature tourism. However, the key difference between them is the element of sustainability. It is relatively easy for a consumer to travel to a natural destination and take part in an 'eco' labeled tour believing they've made a positive impact when in fact, they have done little to contribute to the conservation or preservation of the area they just visited. To minimize

greenwashing, strong standards need to be put in place, especially in developing countries where policy and regulations tend to be weaker (Clayton, 2004).

COUNTER-EXAMPLES: SOME SUCCESSFUL IMPLEMENTATIONS

Yet, for as many locations that lack the ability to put principles into full practice, some are thriving at it. Take for example, the Robinson Club Baobab. Lerner and Hagspiel observed this resort in Kenya in 1999. As reported by Luck (2002), the Robinson Club Baobab is owned and operated by European tour operator Touristik Union International (TUI). In 1990, the company hired an environmental strategist in order to increase environmentally friendly practices across all locations and developed a set of criteria for all their properties. Though situated on approximately one square mile of land, the club only utilizes 2.5% of the area and has established the entire land as a nature preservation park (Luck, 2002). When developing the resort, TUI used only local materials, resulting in traditional African style housing and the maintenance of endangered plant life within the club area (Luck, 2002). Regarding waste, TUI avoids garbage as much as possible. They do this by using glass or ceramic dishes, utensils, and cookware, eliminating beverages in cans, buying condiments in large volume versus individual use packets, food is freshly prepared with each order, leftovers are given to employees to share with their families, and what waste they do produce is composted and used in their own gardens or given to local farmers from who they source their ingredients (Luck, 2002). Regarding water conservation, the club has built their own biological sewage system. This system involves three large ponds in which water moves. Between these three ponds, waste water is pumped into one pond, it is cleaned in another by native plants and fish and arrives in the third pond clean enough to be used in their gardens. The water eventually makes its way back to the groundwater system (Luck, 2002). These are only a few of the ways Robinson Club Baobab are successfully implementing ecotourism principles.

While ecotourism principles seem achievable in theory, these examples also demonstrate putting principles into practice can have limitations. There are locations

that successfully execute ecotourism principles into their tourism industry, but there seem to be more that struggle with doing so. This could be because some principles appear to be more feasible than others and/or not all principles may be engaged at the same time.

DISCUSSION

The tourism industry recognizes its contribution to the decline in the environment and in communities in tourist areas. Because of this, it also recognizes the need for sustainability. Over the past few decades, the travel industry has taken measures to make tourism "greener" knowing it is critical for the continued popularity and growth of the tourism sector. These green initiatives include, but are not limited to, the formation of societies and organizations supporting sustainability, water conservation efforts, waste reduction, volunteer programs, energy efficiency efforts, recycling programs, and educational sessions for tourists.

From sustainable tourism, grew a unique sector known as ecotourism. Ecotourism is often compared to nature tourism, wildlife tourism, or adventure tourism. However, it is its own sector within the tourism industry and began as early as the mid-sixties. In the eighties when transportation was making foreign destinations more accessible and people's interest in the environment began to peak, ecotourism began to thrive. While the definition of ecotourism is still being debated, most definitions are associated with a set of principles that are pillars for sustainability. Of course, each definition and set of principles are dependent on the creator, but even so, there are common themes among principles that include travel to natural areas, minimal impact, elements of culture and education, and direct benefits to the local community. However, despite recognition, desire, and some forward movement for tourism to be sustainable, the tourism industry has not reached its full potential at which it could be sustainable. There are limitations in ecotourism principles in practice and it's important to understand why in order for the tourism industry to continue to grow.

It appears the largest challenge ecotourism faces arises from the lack of a universal definition. Without a concrete definition, and thus a definitive set of principles, ecotourism is interpretive, and many businesses can fraudulently claim to be 'eco' and market and operate as they see fit. Another challenge within ecotourism principles is the belief of ecotourism itself. Many experts argue the ecotourism concept is contradictory and may be inauthentic. This is because bringing travelers to a destination in order to help its preservation, may lead to more damage due to the influx of tourists and their needs. Further, an increase in tourism to an area has the potential to violate culture, limiting the practicability of the principle. Principles indicate tourists should respect local culture and immerse themselves without tainting it. However, some experts argue that tourism ultimately leads to the commodification of local culture.

The literature review highlights case studies that both support and argue the limitations of ecotourism principles in practice. However, even with limitations, there are some companies and destinations that seem to be successful in operating at a high level of sustainability. This is apparent in the case study regarding the Robinson Club Baobab (Luck, 2002). The club property is highly self-sustaining and takes numerous measures to operate as an ecotourism business. Interestingly, the club is owned by a tour operator housed in the United Kingdom. While other places struggle to co-exist with foreign operators, as the Belize case study showed, Robinson Club is able to rise above this.

FEASIBLE PRINCIPLES

Given the number of principles associated with ecotourism definitions, it is near impossible for all to be in effect at one given time. Additionally, it is apparent that some principles are more achievable than others. While not all principles can be utilized, it is still important to implement as many as possible.

Using Honey's (2008) seven principles of ecotourism, it would seem the first principle, travel to natural destination, is not realistic for mass tourism practice. While natural and remote areas may be ideal, natural destinations can sometimes be difficult

and/or expensive to reach, thus making travel not feasible for all. Additionally, travel to only natural destinations excludes urban areas from being considered an ecotourism opportunity. As in the case of the Oamaru Blue Penguins in New Zealand (Houston & Russel, 2000), urban areas can benefit from ecotourism as much as natural destinations.

The second principle references minimizing impact. As in the Robinson Club Baobab case study (Luck, 2002) and the New Zealand Oamaru Blue Penguin case study (Houston & Russel, 2000) it is possible for travelers to visit an area without making a huge impact or leaving a large footprint. With careful planning, enforcement of rules and policy, and the thoughtful execution of making an area self-sustaining, minimal impact is quite achievable.

The third ecotourism principle is centered around building environmental awareness. Through proper marketing channels and the proper education of tourists, tour operators, etc., environmental awareness is a fairly easy principle to achieve. For example, when Americans visit Cuba, they are required to participate in one tour each day of their stay in order to learn about Cuba's history, economy, government, culture, and environment. More nations may be able to enforce this policy in their own countries therefore working with local businesses and tour operators to build awareness for tourists.

The fourth principle indicates ecotourism should provide direct financial benefit for conservation. This is likely one of the easiest principles to fulfill. It has been shown through surveys and polls that overall, people are willing to pay more for sustainable products and services. Use a percentage of increased costs to put back into the local community. Hotels could charge a daily, or one time, conservation fee used to put toward sustainable efforts. Businesses are able to partner with one another and enter agreements to endorse one another, therefore increasing business and revenue. As part of the agreement, each business will contribute a percentage of profits to sustainable practices.

The fifth principle suggests providing financial benefits and empowerment for local people. Tourism has already proven to increase employment opportunity and the opportunity for locals to become business owners making this principle very attainable.

Communities could also establish policy that allows only a percentage of business owners to be foreign. Expatriates could be limited in the amount of land they are allowed to own. Tourism bureaus could promote local businesses over those foreign owned. Incentives would also work well as tourists could receive discounts for patronizing locally owned and operated establishments.

The sixth principle lobbies for the respect of local culture. While this seems like it would be an easy principle to put into action, this can be quite difficult. Although tourists may enjoy elements of local culture, inevitably foreign cultures tend to seep into an area. Hospitality businesses tend to cater to tourist needs and with this brings the introduction of cultural differences. For example, when traveling to foreign lands, some tourists prefer to eat at fast food establishments because it is what is familiar, they know they can eat food on the menu, and they are comfortable. Despite the chain not serving food or beverage consistent with local culture, these fast food restaurants inevitably establish themselves in foreign lands.

Finally, the seventh principle is about supporting human rights and democratic movements. This can also be a difficult principle to follow. While tourists should educate themselves before traveling, not many do and ultimately, they do not know enough about local law or policy to engage correctly while visiting. Additionally, it is fair to say that some may not care about the political climate of destinations as they are a visitor and they believe the issues at hand don't affect them. Some may have travel arrangements that blatantly defy public opinion and/or protest, but they are unwilling to inconvenience themselves to respect people's rights or movements. Thus, this is a less realistic principle to implement.

CONCLUSION

While it is unrealistic to suggest finding a universal definition for ecotourism, it is a critical component to making the concept successful. Ideally, a definition of ecotourism would be established by the largest and most active experts and societies/organizations dedicated to the industry, providing much needed guidance to travelers and industry

businesses alike. Until this is achievable, ecotourism will remain a confusing, misconceived notion. Further, a concrete set of principles to support the definition should be established alongside a definition. Until then, our recommendation is to use Honey's definition and principles for ecotourism as they seem to be the most inclusive of critical components. We would also recommend taking an approach similar to Ceballos-Lascurain's; participate in as many principles as possible knowing they might not all work for a given location or activity.

Another illusive concept, but one that is necessary to reach higher levels of sustainability, is that of certification. Whether a universal certification program is created, or whether program development is left to individual regions targeting specific environmental concerns (which is more likely), certification is crucial to ensure that all businesses operating as 'eco' are legitimate. Without a certification process, businesses are able to position themselves as being environmentally friendly and are able to deceive tourists by making them think they are making a positive contribution to an area. Certifications will ensure that those valid businesses are actually making a positive impact on the destination and have earned their 'eco-seal' by proving their sustainable practices.

Having minimal impact on a destination is essentially the foundation for the ecotourism concept and there are many ways this can be done. Some businesses that cater to tourists are already implementing strategies to reduce their footprint, but some businesses could be doing much more. Some ideas for minimizing impact include:

- Water Conservation: Limit the amount of water being used by tourists by lowering water pressure, limiting the hours water may be used, condensing multiple swimming pools to only one, install water filtration systems in order to eliminate bottled water on the property, collect and re-use rain water to maintain landscaping, etc.
- Waste/Recycling: Reduce the amount of packaging used on the property, use glasses, steel utensils, and ceramic dishes, eliminate daily laundry service, eliminate newspaper delivery, use green cleaning products, place recycle bins not only in rooms but throughout the property, eliminate pamphlets, dining cards,

and other plaques in rooms and move to digital information systems, donate leftover food to individuals and families in need, source products locally, grow ingredients on the property, etc.

- Transportation: Provide free rollerblades, bicycles, etc. to guests for easier travel, offer shuttle/busing options to guests, explore electric modes of transportation, provide incentives for travelers to walk such as a free foot rub in the spa for guests who walk a pre-determined number of miles each day. This would be relatively easy for guests to prove given the number of people that use exercise monitoring devices daily.
- Volunteer Programs: Provide room and board for travelers participating in neighborhood cleanup projects, those building schools and shelters, and those tracking and monitoring native plants and animals, etc. Providing room and board helps allow the business to control the amount of impact the traveler will have on the environment as they can monitor menus, water use, recreational activities, etc. Organizers should consider keeping volunteers abreast progress even after they have left to share with the traveler how their contribution helped and to entice them to come back and help more.

The availability of *funding for sustainability* is one final missing piece. Though not covered in detail within this paper, two common principles point to the direct financial benefit of conservation and local people. Self-sustainability requires the construction of shelter, heating and cooling systems, water systems, etc., and construction requires funding. Though a large investment up front, this investment has the potential to stretch a decade at a time while allowing businesses to be eco-friendly, contribute to ecotourism, and hopefully recoup funds which can be used for future repairs and future additions.

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EL PRINCIPIO DEL ECO-TURISMO: PRÁCTICAS Y FACTORES QUE LIMITAN LA SUSTENTABILIDAD DEL ECO-TURISMO EN EL CAMPO DE TRABAJO

RESUMEN

Los países invierten recursos en el desarrollo de la industria turística, produciendo no sólo un impacto directo en las economías o los recursos comunes sino también en los sistemas sociales. A pesar de aceptar los efectos negativos del turismo sobre el ambiente, los turistas e incluso la gobernanza en la lucha por una comunidad más sustentable, la realidad demuestra que un nuevo debate es necesario con el fin de incorporar los aspectos críticos que hacen a una planificación racional de la actividad. Mientras que no existe una guía práctica de los principios de planificación y la adopción de políticas públicas, lo que es cuestionable es hasta que punto todo ello es de ayuda para el profesional en turismo. Este trabajo se oriente en la exploración de las causas centrales que coadyuvan en la formación de políticas eficientes en materia de eco-turismo.

PALABRAS CLAVE: ECOTURISMO. SUSTENTABILIDAD. CONTRADICCIONES. COSIFICACIÓN. CULTURA. NATURALEZA. TEORÍA. PRÁCTICA.

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