



## Critical Views of Mainstream Approaches on Ecotourism

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### Abstract

Mainstream approaches ecotourism focus on the main idea that the tourism activities employ the kinds of sustainability that are economically viable, ecologically sustainable and socially equitable. Hence, ecotourism is considered a special type of sustainable tourism that aims at responsible use of natural, cultural and historical resources, and it simultaneously contributes to the local and national development and the protection of natural areas. This paper presents critical assessment of the mainstream explanations about the nature of ecotourism. To do so, the critical views in the related literature are collected, reviewed and presented. Their criticisms include the central assumptions and explanations provided by the mainstream scholars about ecotourism, such as definition, goals and outcomes of ecotourism, business practices, environmental sustainability, ethics and tourism policy. It is clear that critical approaches come up with explanations that are diametrically different and, thus reject the validity of the mainstream approaches.

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## **Introduction**

In the 21st century, ecotourism has become the fastest growing sub-sector of the tourism industry, with an annual growth rate of 10-15% worldwide. World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) estimates that global spending on ecotourism is increasing by 20 per cent a year, about six times the industry-wide rate of growth. In 2004, the nature and ecotourism market grew three times faster than the tourism industry as a whole. It is now worth around \$ 100 billion/year (TEEB, 2009). Many countries consider ecotourism as a supplementary source of economic development. Governments, bureaucrats, academicians and business people consider ecotourism as an engine of growth, and source of foreign exchange and employment to revive the national and local economy (Afeyo & Amuqandoh, 2014; K.C., Rijal, & Sapkota, 2015; Sreekumar & Parayil 2002). Asia, Africa and Latin America have rich natural, historical and cultural resources for ecotourism activities. In order to promote ecotourism and increase the share in international ecotourism market, precious resources have been diverted to the provision of airports, local transports, roads, and accommodation services. Natural forests have been encroached and used by expanding ecotourism activities. Historical houses, neighborhoods, towns and attractive physical environments in rural and urban areas have been repaired, restored or renovated. People in some places have been removed from their lands and houses, and investors who have close relations with high ranking officials in governing bodies have moved in, and eye-catching environments have been created in the name of historical, cultural or natural authenticity in order to attract domestic and international tourists. As a result of increased interest, ecotourism has become one of the fast growing businesses throughout the world: UNWTO in 2012 predicted that ecotourism, nature, heritage, cultural and “soft adventure” tourism will grow rapidly over the next two decades and global spending on ecotourism is expected to increase at a higher rate than the tourism industry as a whole (CREST, 2015).

During the rapid development of ecotourism, numerous supporting and some alternative theoretical explanations and also discussions about the nature and benefits of ecotourism flourished and proliferated. This study was designed to provide an assessment of critical approaches of mainstream explanations of ecotourism. To do so, firstly, all explanations that provide affirmative evaluation of ecotourism with minor degrees of criticism about shortcomings and problems of ecotourism and related industries, state policies and ecotourists are grouped and briefly presented under the “mainstream theoretical explanations.” Secondly, explanations that provide critical evaluation of ecotourism and mainstream scholars are grouped and presented. Finally, the article poses valuable recommendations in the line of identifying effective framework for developing ecotourism within all stakeholders involved in tourism process.

## **Mainstream Explanations of Ecotourism**

According to the mainstream explanations, ecotourism is a growing segment of the global tourism industry that is making significant positive contributions to the environmental, social, cultural and economic well-being of destinations and local communities around the world (TIES, 2015). Sustainable development through ecotourism is a concerning issue in the world today. Many countries have ensured their regional development by this concept. In this concept, sustainable development may be occurred by the ecotourism and regional development simultaneously in an area. Dimensions of ecotourism development refer to the environmental, economic, and social

aspects of tourism development, and a suitable balance between these dimensions must be established to maintain its long-term sustainability (Bhuiyan et al, 2012). Linked to the notion of sustainable development and sustainable tourism development, ecotourism has been increasingly promoted both as economic and conservation means of development. Ecotourism has been widely proclaimed as economically viable and environmentally sustainable alternative to mass tourism (Vujadinović et al., 2013). New concepts and features are added to the definitions such as responsibility, environmentally friendly destination management and sustainable development of local populations (Torquebiau & Taylor, 2009). It is presented as preferable and a special type of sustainable tourism and said that it contributes to local and regional economic development, benefits and empowers local communities, provides environmental conservation and scientific research, protects wildlife, endangered species and fragile ecosystems, educates and creates widespread environmental awareness among people, tourists and tourism industry (Hsu & Lin, 2013; Honey, 2008).

Quebec declaration on ecotourism (2002) recognizes the principles of sustainable tourism. Its main purpose is the setting of a preliminary agenda and a set of recommendations for the development of ecotourism activities in the context of sustainable development. Recognize that ecotourism embraces the principles of sustainable tourism, concerning the economic, social and environmental impacts of tourism. It also embraces the following specific principles which distinguish it from the wider concept of sustainable tourism: a) contributes actively to the conservation of natural and cultural heritage, includes local and indigenous communities in its planning, b) development and operation, and contributing to their well-being, c) interprets the natural and cultural heritage of the destination to visitors, d) lends itself better to independent travelers, as well as to organized tours for small size groups (Quebec declaration on ecotourism 2002).

According to the newly revised definition of ecotourism of The International Ecotourism Society (TIES, 2015), ecotourism is "responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people and involves interpretation and education" with the specification that education is to staff and guests. It benefits local communities and destinations environmentally, culturally and economically (TIES, 2015). Education is meant to be inclusive of both staff and guests. Ecotourism is about uniting conservation, communities, and sustainable travel. The principles of ecotourism are to: a) minimize physical, social, behavioral, and psychological impacts, b) build environmental and cultural awareness and respect, c) provide positive experiences for both visitors and hosts, d) provide direct financial benefits for conservation, e) Generate financial benefits for both local people and private industry, f) deliver memorable interpretative experiences to visitors that help raise sensitivity to host countries' political, environmental, and social climates, g) design, construct and operate low-impact facilities, h) recognize the rights and spiritual beliefs of the indigenous people in your community and work in partnership with them to create empowerment.

The above definitions and explanations about ecotourism indicate that the proponents of mainstream (or dominant theoretical views and supporting paradigms) focus on the interrelated and supportive host of concepts that include responsible travel, natural areas, wildlife, nature-based, small scale, benign, non-damaging, non-degrading, environmental effect, minimum or no impact, bird watching, wildlife watching, nature walk, conscientious use, sustainability, conservation, balance, awareness, education, admiring, knowing, appreciation,

respecting, participation, local life, culture, history, welfare, economic benefit for local communities, local ownership, the relevance of cultural resources, and host community participation (Weaver & Lawton, 2007).

Ecotourism is one of the major activities to protect natural and cultural resources, while also providing economic benefits to both local people and government. Successful ecotourism planning is a function of establishing sound goals and criteria (Demir, Esbah, & Akgün, 2016). Mainstream explanations find some problems in ecotourism that are mostly related with individual knowledge and behavior of some tourists, travel agents, tour operators and local people. They find the solution in environmental education of especially ecotourists and empowerment of local people who are interested in ecotourism. By increasing capacity building opportunities, ecotourism is also an effective vehicle for empowering local communities around the world to fight against poverty and to achieve sustainable development (Surendran & Sekhar, 2011). Furthermore, ecotourism has provided an impetus to assist in greening the tourism industry on many fronts (TIES, 2015).

Ecological principles have been considered as the guidelines for tourism and the need to protect the eco-environment has increased substantially. On this basis, the ecotourism planning, has emerged and it has benefits in terms of both economic development and environmental conservation. The ecotourism planning is based on two important criteria: local tourism resources and ecotourism carrying capacity (Shi, et. al., 2015).

### **Critical Assessments**

Critical assessments provide alternative explanations and criticize the mainstream approaches.

#### **Determining Ecotourism: Nature of Activity vs. Place of Activity**

Almost all mainstream definitions agree that ecotourism involves traveling to relatively undisturbed or uncontaminated natural places; it is a form of nature-based tourism, an enlightening nature travel experience and/or wildlife-related recreation activity. These explanations describe the place of activity and prescribe the activity location, and promote the idea that any tourism activity done in the natural areas is ecotourism. There are serious problems in such explanations, because ecotourism must be determined by the nature of activity, not by the place of activity. It is not the location or the quantity, but the nature of the activity, use, organization and outcome that must characterize ecotourism. But, not all tourism to natural areas is ecotourism. That is why, contrary to mainstream explanations, fencing a large area of land on top of mountains, building bungalows, restaurants and providing entertainments, organizing tours and daily excursions to remote and natural areas are not sufficient condition for an activity to be called ecotourism.

#### **Sustainable Use and Conservation**

Theoretical objective of conservation and sustainability: According to the mainstream theoretical explanation, ecotourism establishes a sustaining balance between the natural environment and use of environment for ecotourism: The development of ecotourism can help saving the natural environment by encouraging a non-consumptive use of wildlife, while generating valuable foreign income. This prescriptive narrative assumes that the protective use of natural areas is inevitable and necessary for generating source of income. Thus, ecotourism is presented as a tool for both conservation and sustainable development (Stronza, 2007), especially in areas where

local people are asked to forgo the consumptive use of resources for others. This focus on the notion of balance between economic interests and environmental conservation is one of the main tenets of ecotourism. This notion is nourished by the ideology of development and sustainable tourism. Thus, one of the most stated principle of ecotourism is forged: the sustainable use of exhaustible natural resources with no or minimal negative environmental effect. Namely, ecotourism represents eco-friendly use of natural resources (Li, 2004; Nyuapane & Poudel, 2011; Surendran & Sekhar, 2011).

The proponents of ecotourism have failed to see the threat caused by such activities. Rise in the number of tourists, which exceeds the carrying capacity of the place, leads to very erosion of natural resources for which tourists come (Drumm, 2008). The implementation of an ecotourism model in conjunction with protected area management has often focused less on social justice and democracy than on ecological preservation, aesthetic integrity and efficiency. Critics of ecotourism note that even projects specifically designed to incorporate and benefit local people often fail to do so (Gezon, 2014).

### **Misrepresented Contributions**

The most mainstream studies cite various positive contributions as well as some potential and negative outcomes. These contributions and outcomes are mostly related with various effects.

One of the most cited contribution is related with conservation of biodiversity. Contrarily, a large number of articles put forward that ecotourism is not effective in promoting conservation of biodiversity.

Many mainstream scholars consider ecotourism as an instrument for revenue generation for the local population (Avisar & Fox, 2012; Drumm & Moore, 2005; Mbaiwa, 2015). Cobbinat (2015) pointed out that local ecotourism agencies perceive ecotourism as only environmental conservation and revenue generation. The word ‘ecotourism’ is to attract customers, and thereby generate more income. Many protected areas in developing countries is found to be poorly planned, with the infrastructure and management inadequate even unsuitable for ecotourism (Das & Chatterjee, 2015). Isaacs (2000) criticizes ecotourism as a wildlife conservation strategy for its inability to insure the long term protection of environmental assets. He indicates that ecotourism is only a proxy market designed to attract customers. Ecotourism policies are designed to attract consumers' preferences for recreation. In that process, revenue generation has become the prime consideration and protection of environmental assets has been kept aside. This is leading directly to environmental degradation. As a result he states that the term “ecotourism” is somewhat vague. The International Union for Conservation of Nature has listed ecotourism in 1992 as the second major threat to protected areas.

Another misrepresented contribution is that ecotourism is often proposed as a way to make conservation pay for itself and, furthermore, make valuable contributions to the local culture and life. This is an assumption that is mostly wrong. If conservation is a goal, the revenues from conservation can be enhanced through the use of complementary sources of funding (Coria & Calfucura, 2012). Unfortunately, in practice ecotourism has failed to deliver the expected benefits to local communities in Turkey and elsewhere (e.g., Agrawal & Redford, 2006; Coria & Calfucura, 2012; Das & Chatterjee, 2015; Carter et. al., 2015). Adejumo, Amusa, Adamu (2014) found that there was no significant correlation between revenue generation from ecotourism and tourists flow across the years

from in Kainji Lake National Park (KLNP), North Central Nigeria. Das & Chatterjee (2015) show that the literature about the economic contributions and other effects of ecotourism are divided into two categories. Mainstream scholars are in favor of ecotourism and consider it as a mechanism leading to new sources of income and betterment in household conditions. It also leads to local economic development through multiplier effect. On the other hand, critical approaches demonstrate the problems associated with ecotourism, such as (1) revenue leakages, as labor is drawn from urban sector, instead of focusing on training of unskilled or less-skilled locals, (2) inequitable distribution of income among the locals, (3) compulsory displacement for the creation of national parks leading to large scale loss of land, homelessness, food insecurity, loss of lives, and increase in morbidity, (4) restrictions in accessing sanctuary resulting in joblessness and (5) damage to crop and livestock by wildlife. All such problems aggravate poverty of the locals.

Contrary to the explanations of mainstream scholars, ecotourism fails to reduce forest dependency of local population.

Unfortunately, large portion of mainstream ecotourism studies establish invalid causal ties between the level and nature of local participation with attitudes, perception, motivation, education, access or commitment (Stone, 2015).

### **Macro-initiatives: International Policies**

The reinterpretation of the economy through environmental rhetoric and sustainable development slowly emerged in the 1970s and gained momentum in the 1980s and 1990s. The intellectual bias and mythical character of sustainable development existed right at the beginning of its official formation and declaration by the World Commission of Environment and Development. Since the World Commission on Environment and Development first proposed their iconic definition of sustainable development as “sustainable development is a development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987); the tourism and allied industries, scholars and various other interested parties have shown an innate fascination with exploring the processes and outcomes that are possible from the development of a sustainable global tourism. While the parameters of exactly what sustainable tourism does and does not encompass continue to be debated, a recurring theme in much of the published academic scholarship relates to the merging of a range of environmental, economic and social forces in particular destination settings (Wearing, Stephen, & Tower, 2016). The declaration acknowledges that there is a serious problem in sustaining the needs at present and danger on sustainability in the future. These catchy phrases give the (wrong) impression that sustainability is the sustainability of every body's needs and interests.

At the 1992 Rio Conference on the environment, the mythical notion of sustainability was accepted by governments, nongovernmental organizations and many environmentalists. Finally, it turned to be the part of global politics of domination as green geopolitics supported by the United States and the European Union in the 2000s. Idea of sustainable development became the major part of the rationalized popular global control in the 21st century. The main organizing principle of sustainable (tourism) development is the economic growth: Creating it, managing it, distributing its costs and benefits on a national scale in particular territorialized states. “There is now broad consensus that tourism development should be sustainable; however, the question of how to achieve this

remains an object of debate.” All, it is claimed, want more material goods and social services; so global elites compete to control the markets that allow them to implement various policies to serve these ends.

Cetinel & Yolal (2009) indicated that the idea of balance in sustainable development is intended to explain the right balance between the need for development and the need for environmental protection. The language of balance can be misleading since one's balance is another's imbalance and it is used to mask the reality that economic growth is generally the primary concern (Harris & associates, 2002). The same dominant rationale exists behind the inclusion of tourism in the national and local development. It is summarized by the OECD statement: "Tourism helps to speed up development in poor countries. It is easier to attract tourists than to sell high-tech products on the world market." Similarly, in 1989, the Hague Declaration on Tourism focused on the place of tourism in economic and social development. It emphasized the importance of formulating and applying policies to promote harmonious development of domestic and international tourism and leisure activities for the benefit of all those who participate in them. However, this explicit acknowledgement of the socio-economic issues appears to have been lost in the subsequent discourse on sustainable tourism.

The UN ‘International year of Ecotourism’ of 2002 marked a major rise of ecotourism as an important form of sustainable tourism (Butcher, 2006). In 2012, the Second Committee of the UN General Assembly (UNGA) adopted the resolution on the “Promotion of ecotourism for poverty eradication and environment protection”. Recognizing that ecotourism, within the framework of sustainable tourism, is a cross-cutting activity able to promote job creation and education, the resolution highlights its potential to improve livelihoods in local communities, achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) as well as contribute to the sustainable development and protection of biodiversity by encouraging communities and tourists to preserve natural and cultural heritage (UNWTO, 2015a). In 2014, a milestone resolution recognizing the contribution of sustainable tourism to poverty eradication, community development and the protection of biodiversity was adopted by consensus by the United Nations General Assembly. The resolution places sustainable tourism firmly on the UN post-2015 agenda and it requests UNWTO and other United Nations agencies to develop “... recommendations on ways and means to promote sustainable tourism, including ecotourism, as a tool for fighting poverty and promoting sustainable development ...” to be submitted to the seventy-first session of the UN General Assembly in 2016 (UNWTO, 2015b). Ecotourism is introduced as a form of sustainable tourism: “Ecotourism is a sector of tourism, based on nature travel, but including the principle of sustainability (TIES, 2015). It is regarded as a viable tool for changing communities, leading to new ways of thinking, interacting, and behaving, and economic development that takes conservation into account. During the implementation of the ecotourism policies, new “environment friendly” products are produced and clean production processes, environmental monitoring and rehabilitation systems are developed, initiatives for preventing pollution, reducing waste and maximizing the energy savings are taken by the same system that creates environmental problems. Namely, industrial structures, nation states and various national and international bodies forged some solutions that are mostly based on (a) reductions in uses that are presented as environmental protections are in fact reduction in costs for the industries and (b) dealing with environmental symptoms by providing new “environment friendly” technological products and practices that enhance the power and influence of the same industries that destroy natural and human environments. Vastly

ignored is the fact that ecotourism is the part of the market policy that expands its sphere of influence and activity in rural and natural areas, enhancing the tourism industry, mass-market consumerism, dependency, and destroying indigenous life forms and ecological integrity. Picard (2015) focused on the importance of fostering criteria for ensuring medium and long-term economic viability in the assessment of sustainable ecotourism development performance, both at micro- and macro-economic levels.

### **National Corporate and State Policies**

Implementation of sustainable ecotourism development has often been accompanied by the emergence of various multiple-stakeholder alliances, institutions and strategies linking private and public sectors and intertwining various local, national and regional polity scales (Picard, 2015). According to the mainstream ideological framework, state institutions and governments play the role of regulator in order to make things run smooth, but generally they fail to provide necessary legal provisions, establish monitoring and control mechanisms. Local governments lack guidelines, regulations, monitoring and implementation systems that protect natural resources from negative effects. The expanding domination of neo-liberal idea that shuns the government intervention and upholds the self-regulation or auto-control buttresses the practices of fakery and ostentation. Principles, ethics, forged social responsibility initiatives, legal restrictions and regulations cannot make business people act accordingly.

During the implementation of the ecotourism policy, new “environment friendly” products are produced and clean production processes, environmental monitoring and rehabilitation systems are developed, initiatives for preventing pollution, reducing waste and maximizing the energy savings are taken by the same system that creates environmental problems. Vastly ignored is the fact that ecotourism is the part of the market policy that expands its sphere of influence and activity in rural and natural areas, enhancing the tourism industry, mass-market consumerism, dependency, and destroying indigenous life forms and ecological integrity.

According to some scholars (Honey, 2008; Laudati, 2010), ecotourism policies are designed to influence tourist preferences for the purpose of revenue generation which is the principle consideration. Other policy and practice issues that are contrary to the stated characters of ecotourism include the exploitative resource use for higher financial gains, the lack of respect to the carrying capacity of the destination, using jeeps and vehicles with high CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, wildlife and habitat disturbance and environmental degrading, negative impact on wildlife behavior, human migration to the area, decrease in growth of flora and fauna, unsustainable resource use, the local dispossession of private land, loss of control over the land use by local people (Banerjee, 2010). While the negative impacts of ecotourism may arguably be less severe than alternative enterprises, they are not totally benign. Ecotourism will be unable to solve many of the environmental problems its proponents believe it can. It also may create problems of its own (Isaacs, 2000).

### **Conclusion**

Ecotourism has numerous stakeholders ranging from local to international entities. One of the vastly ignored stakeholders is the academics that engage in teaching and research in ecotourism. It is rare to see considerable debate among academia, planners and decision makers regarding ecotourism community since ecotourism has been

vehemently promoted as economically viable solution for local development and great majority of academicians are interested in doing research to find out ecotourism potentials of local communities, mountainous villages, pristine natural environments, beautiful pastoral areas, creeks, rivers, lakes and historical places. Some researchers acknowledge the undesirable outcomes of ecotourism and focus on the idea that financial gains had not equally transcended to all spheres of sustainable local development and the activities have lacked the systematic long-term planning required for sustainable ecotourism. Hence, they suggest responsible practices and some necessary corrective measures to overcome unwanted outcomes of ecotourism activities. Very few researchers evaluate ecotourism as an expansion of tourism industries and activities beyond the confines of seashores and summer season, disguised as a form of sustainable nature-based tourism that promotes conservation of biodiversity, ecological, cultural, historical, local and scenic values. According to this marginal view, promotion of local livelihoods, ecological sustainment and biodiversity through ecotourism has been cunningly forged, prepared and worldwide disseminated factoids that promotes the interests of tourism and allied industries, and sustainability, in fact, refers to the sustainability of the industrial structures.

Most mainstream explanations confuse “normative statements” with facts. For instance, Quebec declaration on ecotourism (2002) provides facts in the following statement: Ecotourism has provided a leadership role in introducing sustainability practices to the tourism sector. The declaration also provides normative statements/suggestions by using the word “should”.

There are lots of suggestions, recommendations and talks about the functions of ecotourism to improve the environment and economic welfare of local people by forming a symbiotic relationship between powerful parties involved in ecotourism and local people (e.g., Stronza & Gordillo, 2008). However the main point is missing in these recommendations: How to establish a symbiotic relationship among the involved parties? Unfortunately, all the recommendations that are related with a symbiotic relationship or equitable distribution of benefits remain extremely ineffective in the face of the fact that industrial relations are based on vested interests and power relations which determine the nature of aims and outcomes.

As Isaacs (2000) stated “the protection of wildlife resources requires informed choices regarding the impact and consequences of human activities on the natural world. If society elects to conserve sufficient resources for ecosystem protection, it will need a better conservation mechanism than an imperfect market system organized around ecotourism or any other amenity”.

The mainstream idea of ecotourism nicely fits in the sustainable development notion: There are poor, conventional and economically inactive local communities. These communities need jobs and products of modern life. Ecotourism is one of their saviors: Ecotourism brings the opportunities of welfare, safety, security to the local communities. What they have to do is simply to participate in the action for development. This classical rhetoric, which is supported by the other rhetorical discourses about globalization, privatization, free market, individual freedom, entrepreneurship, sustainability and development, serves the systemic requirements of politics of the globalizing industrial activities. Once ecotourism (or any other activity) is conceived and accepted this way in popular mind, then any intervention, like opening the protected areas for the use of tourism industries and land developers, can be easily propagated as the necessary initiative for the national development, maintaining growth,

advancement, creating jobs and raising the standards of living in local/rural communities. This forged reality is vehemently supported thorough daily discourses by governments, politicians, academicians, international finance and lending institutions, corporations and mass media. Thus, the global practices of economic exploitation and the exploiters are metamorphosed into the providers of goods and services for the benefit of people on earth.

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