

【Notes & Discussions】

**Considering Ecotourism as a Tool for
Sustainable Development and Its Status
in Japan**

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研究ノート

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1. Background

The relationship between tourism and geography has always been obvious, but tourism's impact on the environment was not always so apparent. Tourism is commonly referred to as a smokeless industry, but the impacts it can have on the natural environment became clear and, in an effort to minimize them, the concept of 'ecotourism' evolved. Ecotourism is touted as a more environmentally-friendly alternative than mass tourism, which is typically considered to be less sensitive to such concerns. The International Ecotourism Society (TIES), which was established in 1990, defines ecotourism as "Responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the

environment and improves the well-being of local people"

(“What is ecotourism,” n.d.).

This research will attempt a simple overview of some of the varied interpretations of ecotourism and alternative terms that endorse similar concepts.

Ecotourism's ability to contribute to sustainable development will also be considered and, although it is often demonised in sustainable development circles, the possibility that mass tourism (through its purveyors) may yet have a role to play will be mentioned.

2. Expectations of Ecotourism

As something of a self-styled overseer of ecotourism, TIES promulgates several principles:

Ecotourism is about uniting conservation, communities, and sustainable travel. This means that those who implement and participate in ecotourism activities should follow the following ecotourism principles:

-Minimize impact.

- Build environmental and cultural awareness and respect.
- Provide positive experiences for both visitors and hosts.
- Provide direct financial benefits for conservation.
- Provide financial benefits and empowerment for local people.
- Raise sensitivity to host countries' political, environmental, and social climate.

(“What is ecotourism,” n.d.).

Naturally, the tourism promoters themselves are usually hoping to run the venture as a profitable business, but with the expectation that the ‘triple bottom line’ will be satisfied.

3. Ecotourism and Geography

By its very definition, ecotourism (and tourism in general) utilizes the characteristics of the landscape as part of its appeal to potential consumers of its product. How the landscape is evaluated by ecotourism developers and consumers plays a major part in the impact they will have upon it. If ecotourism truly ‘conserves the environment’, then it could be assumed this impact will be minimal. However, critics of forms of self-styled ecotourism that do not subscribe to the above definition (i.e. which simply use the term as a form of ‘greenwashing’) imply that in a large number of cases so-called ‘ecotourism’ developments actually have a large and usually negative impact upon the landscape of the destination.

Mehta (2005) establishes ecotourism as a

“special part of environmental tourism,” which is “primarily a geographical type of tourism” (pp. 22-3). He asserts that the outdoor activities associated with environmental tourism “appeal to special interest groups” (p. 22) and, akin to ethnic tourism, attract “an elite tourist to remote areas to experience a truly alien scenario” (p. 22). In his analysis, ecotourism “primarily involves the local community in preservation of the fine ecological balance in its natural habitat while maintaining cultural and biological diversities in a sustainable manner” (p. 23). He adds a cautionary note when he says that

...eco-tourism in India should be handled with great caution in view of the inherent dangers of inflicting irreparable damages to finely balanced ecosystems, already under great pressure from the bloating and ever expanding population in India

(Mehta, 2005, p. 34).

This situation and caveat is certainly not unique to India and highlights one of the greatest challenges to any form of tourism whose goal is to be sustainable. The damage often wrought to the natural and human environment by mass tourism stands as a warning to stakeholders whose intentions may be good; any tourism-related endeavour runs the risk of becoming too much of a good thing.

4. Relationship to other forms of Tourism

Ecotourism cannot be completely separated from other forms of tourism, such as cultural tourism – itself comprising several

sub-sectors, including heritage tourism, arts tourism, and farm tourism, amongst others. A broader definition of ecotourism could easily overlap with those of other forms of tourism, especially sub-sectors of cultural tourism and, in particular, indigenous and rural cultural tourism, where the lives of people are often intricately connected with the natural environment. This can pose challenges when attempting to determine whether a development meets ecotourism criteria, where they exist, but could also be seen as an incentive to include ecotourism within the broader category of sustainable tourism.

The knowledge and expectations of tourists who will or may participate in the experience also bear serious consideration. With regard to cultural tourists, McKercher and Du Cros identify five potential types:

- 1 the *purposeful* cultural tourist, for whom culture is a primary motivator and who seeks a deep cultural experience;
- 2 the *sightseeing* cultural tourist, who travels for cultural reasons but seeks a shallower experience;
- 3 the *serendipitous* cultural tourist, who is not primarily motivated by culture, but who gets into a deep cultural experience by chance;
- 4 the *casual* cultural tourist, for whom culture is a weak motivating factor and who seeks a shallow experience;
- 5 the *incidental* cultural tourist, for whom culture is not a stated motive, but who does visit cultural attractions
(as cited in Smith, 2009, p. 33).

These types can easily be extrapolated to an ecotourism context and it is easy to imagine the difference in reactions by each type to situations that may entail varying degrees of discomfort and inconvenience in order to not only ensure an authentic experience, but also to fulfill criteria for sustainability and minimal impact. Smith (2009, p.110) quotes Haakanson's assessment of visitors' expectations for comfortable sleeping accommodations and freedom from pests, unpleasant sights, and strange foods, commenting that "although modern tourists clearly enjoy the culture and heritage, they often do not like the lifestyle that comes with it!" (Smith, 2009, p.110).

Any temptation to assume that these challenges can be overcome by aiming exclusively at a very specific clientele is likely to be premature, as Smith (2009, p.105; summarizing Zeppel) points out when referring to the fact that "the growth of so many Indigenous ecotourism ventures in Latin America may not be matched by market demand."

Such growth can be attributed to the fact that "ecotourism ventures can help to provide a means of preserving natural and cultural resources, and a way of making a living...Tourism development has often provided a good economic alternative to logging, mining, and agriculture; it can help to support schools and improve healthcare, as well as strengthening indigenous cultures" (Smith, 2009, p.105).

5. Tourism and Sustainable Development

The concept of sustainable development has permeated much of the literature related to any forms of development over the past two decades, and tourism is no exception. The WTO offers as a definition:

Sustainable tourism development meets the needs of the present tourists and host regions while protecting and enhancing the opportunity for the future. It is envisaged as leading to management of all resources in such a way that economic, social and aesthetic needs can be fulfilled, while maintaining cultural integrity, essential ecological processes, biological diversity and life support systems

(as cited in Liu, 2004, p.460).

Balancing the needs of the environment with the needs of local residents can present numerous challenges. Though it is very often the case that the tourism resource can be degraded under the influence of mass tourism, actually identifying the resource itself is not always a straightforward matter. Different stakeholders may have differing interpretations of what the resource is, and how it should be used. This has consequences for decisions relating to conservation, as well as the provision and development of tourist facilities and amenities. From a strict conservation viewpoint, limiting use and access may be the best approach for sustaining the resource, however, local residents may thus be deprived of alternate, and often traditional, uses of the same resource. This is sometimes the case when an area has

been designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, as the designation carries with it strict rules on the management and utilization of the area. Smith (2009) cites one example in Hungary where some villages had considered renouncing their area's status because it "means that factories cannot be built even though there is high unemployment in the region, and some feel the status is causing more harm than good" (p.219).

Although varying opinions exist, mass tourism is generally considered to be more harmful to the host area and something of an antithesis to sustainable development. Macleod (2004) documents primarily the cultural changes experienced by a small island community as it went through the process of moving from a fringe tourist destination to a destination for mass-tourism. There are many arguments as to the advantages and disadvantages of varying forms of tourism development, however from the perspective of sustainable tourism, mass-tourism would not generally be considered desirable.² The ability to foresee what types of developments are likely to lead to a sustainable industry and to determine how they should be regulated, is of major concern.

6. Geotourism

The 'geotourism' concept of National Geographic's Center for Sustainable Destinations attempts to meld the principles of sustainable tourism and ecotourism with a more geographically-oriented approach to tourism. National Geographic describes it

thus:

Geotourism is defined as tourism that sustains or enhances the geographical character of a place—its environment, culture, aesthetics, heritage, and the well-being of its residents.

Geotourism incorporates the concept of sustainable tourism—that destinations should remain unspoiled for future generations—while allowing for ways to protect a place's character. Geotourism also takes a principle from its ecotourism cousin,—that tourism revenue should promote conservation—and extends it to culture and history as well, that is, all distinctive assets of a place

(“About Geotourism,” n.d.).

Whether this approach will help to define the discourse on this topic, or just further add to the jumble of overlapping terms is a matter of opinion, but putting a stronger geographic emphasis on it may well hold appeal to those whose inclinations lie in that direction.

7. Compliance Issues

In any situation where a tourism venture is being planned in a legally protected area, or any environmentally sensitive area, the need for compliance with carefully prepared guidelines by prospective tour operators is apparent. However, an important factor for achieving this can easily be overlooked if the approach taken to the venture concentrates solely on economic factors for compliance enforcement,

such as sanctions or rewards. In Sirakaya's (1995) survey of the compliance of ecotour operators with ecotourism guidelines, one of his main findings is that the degree of compliance is enhanced with education for the operators (p.124). When identifying the most relevant factors (as determined through his study) for attaining compliance, he highlights its role thus:

These factors may involve education of individual tour operators with respect to the value of the guidelines, the harmful impacts of noncompliance to both the host community and their business image in the market, guilt feelings resulting from perceived harmful impacts of their noncompliant behavior

(Sirakaya, 1995, p.125).

8. Ecotourism in Japan

One research goal will be to assess the current role of the Japanese government's “The Committee for Promoting Ecotourism” and progress on the “Five Measures for Promoting Ecotourism” (United Nations Environment Programme, 2006) it had adopted. Are these relevant to the potential for ecotourism ventures based on the use of privately-held land, or are they of primary relevance to ventures that would be taking place in protected areas?

The issue of how different cultures perceive and approach tourism is addressed in the Japanese context by Arlt (2006), who evaluates tourism in Japan as being “laden with concepts quite different from other industrialised countries” (p.199) and goes on to list four factors to support that

assertion:

- the unique circumstances of the ongoing 'nation-building' process of the imagined community 'Japan'
- the position of leisure and tourism in the Japanese society
- the strong influence of 'big business' interests in tourism development
- the forms of nature appreciation in Japan

(Arlt, 2006, p.199).

His findings appear to suggest that the Japanese perception of 'nature' results in a situation whereby

Rather than concentrating on the ecological and economical side of the 'sustainability triangle', local participation and community involvement is seen as a way to overcome the problem of depopulation of the countryside with the help of tourism. The interest of the environment as a stakeholder per se is ignored; human interaction and pride are the important elements of sustainable tourism

(Arlt, 2006, p.205).

If this assessment accurately portrays current thinking in Japan regarding the natural environment, then the perception of the criteria circumscribing ecotourism ventures may deviate substantially from that accompanying similar ventures in other OECD countries. That would have implications for how Japan does or will interpret international guidelines for ecotourism or sustainable tourism, and may well imply that a consideration of how other nations' cultural filters affect their implementation

of such guidelines, or even of how their regulatory systems deal with such ventures needs to be made when performing relevant analysis and comparisons.

9. New Zealand as a Model

Does New Zealand provide useful models or examples of the implementation of sustainable tourism or ecotourism that other OECD countries (especially Japan) can learn from? One possible role-model for a non-typical venture can be found in New Zealand's South Island, not far from the city of Christchurch.

The Banks Peninsula Track located entirely on privately owned land on Banks Peninsula, near Akaroa, New Zealand, is an interesting example of a form of ecotourism where the land on which the tourist experience takes place is not a protected area. Though a marine mammal sanctuary (The Banks Peninsula Marine Mammal Sanctuary) completely surrounds the peninsula and there is a marine reserve (Flea Bay/Pōhātu Marine Reserve) along the track, these are non-land based (except for the foreshore) and do not impinge on the rights of the property owners. Thus issues of compliance and standards are handled completely within the framework of a group of private individuals (the landowners). To facilitate this, the landowners established a privately owned company within which they are shareholders (Hargreaves, 2002, p.8). Advantages to operating via a company include protection from direct liability, consensual decision-making, ease of dealing with regula-

tory issues, and “the company structure assisted with overall quality management and safety issues relating to the standard of the walking track and the accommodation” (Hargreaves, 2002, p.9).

Long-term viability of the venture is an issue due to the number of landowners involved and although “currently there is a strong financial incentive for landowners to cooperate...this may not always be the case if a wealthy new landowner valued privacy and solitude more highly than cash flow” (Hargreaves, 2002, p.14). If any of the landowners were to withdraw from the agreement, the entire venture would be threatened.

10. Conclusions and Further Study

Liu(2004) suggests that the idea of sustainable tourism should not so much be confined to one small niche form, but that “more fundamentally, our task is to develop conventional mass tourism sustainably and supplement it with all sorts of alternative forms of tourism where and when appropriate” (p.471). Given the scale of global tourism, this would seem to be the most appropriate approach. Perhaps the development of small-scale ventures displaying the characteristics of sustainable tourism are nonetheless one means of conveying the feasibility of the concept to larger providers, who may then incrementally incorporate it into their day-to-day operations.

Further study will be done into the challenges/benefits of promoting ecotourism

ventures across a diverse group of stakeholders, including private individuals (such as the Banks Peninsula Track landowners) and what ventures exist or have potential in Japan.

¹ The triple bottom line is a phrase coined in 1998 by John Elkington and in common use today. It encompasses social, economic and environmental factors in public sector full cost accounting and is often evoked by the “people, planet, profit” slogan. It is one concept that is commonly expected to be applied to evaluating ecotourism ventures.

² Lück (2002) presents initiatives to offset or decrease impacts by mass tourism operators, which may or may not significantly reduce impacts. Interestingly, they do not attempt to sell themselves under an ecotourism label (thus perhaps avoiding potential accusations of greenwashing) and such initiatives bear further investigation as another potential approach to achieving some degree of sustainability in tourism.

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