Mass-Ecotourism: An Alternative to Sustainable Tourism Development in Developing Countries

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The literature often argues that it is essential to involve local people in the planning and management of ecotourism in order to achieve the development and conservation goals of ecotourism (Drumm, 1998; Page and Dowling, 2002; Veal, 2002). However, many research findings on variable impact of ecotourism in several less developed countries indicate that domestic participation is limited and the number in a community who are directly affected is negligible (Weaver, 1998). Two contributing factors are: 1) there are structural, operational and cultural limitations to community participation in tourism development process (Tosun, 2000), and 2) the direct revenue of ecotourism industry is constrained by the dominance of PCPD (popular, casual, passive, diversionary) ecotourists, whose expenditures within the protected areas or in adjacent communities tend to be minimal. As a result, many ecotourism operations in developing countries are dependent upon the existence of a well-developed mass-tourism sector in order to remain viable. This paper attempts to examine two case study areas in Malaysia and justify whether it is necessary to use the term ‘mass ecotourism’, to describe the increasingly common intersection of sustainable mass-tourism and non-consumptive nature tourism. The challenge for ecotourism and park planners is to foster mutually beneficial linkages between the two sectors and to avoid a situation where the negative traits of mass tourism are simply transferred to other venues.

Key words: ecotourism, sustainable development, nature tourism, mass tourism, community participation

Introduction

This paper discusses the origin and definitions of the concept of ecotourism and the complexity of trying to define the ecotourism term. The subsequent part critically appraises its relation to sustainable tourism and sustainable ecotourism because ecotourism fits within the larger concept of sustainability, followed by a brief discussion of the research methodology and background of ecotourism sites. The final part of the paper presents the findings and examines several application issues of ecotourism in Malaysia, particularly its relation to mass-tourism sector.

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Origin and Definitions of Ecotourism

The phenomenon known as ecotourism was in existence long before the terminology began to be used within tourism studies although it was often called other things. Fennell (1999) has traced one of the origins of the term ‘ecotourism’ to the work of Hetzer (1965). Hetzer used it to explain the intricate relationship between tourists, the environments and cultures in which they interacted. Other early references to ecotourism are found in Miller’s (1978) work on national park planning for ecodevelopment in Latin America, and documentation produced by Environment Canada in relation to a set of road-based ‘ecotours’ they developed from the mid-1970s through to the early 1980s.

Ecotourism developed ‘within the womb’ of the environmental movement in the 1970s and 1980s (Honey, 1999, p.19). Growing environmental concern coupled with an emerging dissatisfaction with mass tourism led to increased demand for nature-based experiences of an alternative nature. At the same time, less developed countries began to realise that nature-based tourism offers a means of earning foreign exchange and providing a less destructive use of resources than alternatives such as logging and agriculture (Honey, 1999). By the mid-1980s, a number of such countries had identified ecotourism as a means of achieving both conservation and development goals.

The first formal definition of ecotourism is generally credited to Ceballos-Lascurain (1996), who defined it as travelling to relatively undisturbed or uncontaminated natural areas with the specific objective of studying, admiring, and enjoying the scenery and its wild plants and animals, as well as any existing cultural manifestations (both past and present) found in these areas. While definitions such as that of Ceballos-Lascurain (1996) and Boo (1990) tended to emphasise the nature-based experience sought by the tourist, more recent definitions have tended to highlight various principles associated with the concept of sustainable development. According to Wight (1993), sustainable ecotourism imposes an ‘ethical overlay’ on nature-based tourism that has an educative emphasis. Although this overlay has, arguably, been implicit, if not explicit, the concept does appear to have evolved into something explicitly normative over the past decade. This, in part, is a reflection of increasing recognition among industry and government that nature-based tourism can only be sustained in the long term if a principled and proactive supply-side management approach is adopted.

Beaumont’s (1998) approach to ecotourism suggests that ecotourism is a subset of nature tourism, which in turn, is a subset of tourism. The three main principles, which are also common to a number of other definitions of ecotourism, are natural setting, ecological sustainability and environmental education or interpretation. Similarly, the Australian Department of Tourism (1994) defines ecotourism as nature-based tourism that involves education and interpretation of the natural environment and is managed so as to be ecologically sustainable. This Australian definition recognises that ‘natural environment’ includes cultural components and that ‘ecologically sustainable’ involves an appropriate return to the local community and long-term conservation of the resource. Ecotourism is defined as environmentally responsible travel and visitation to relatively undisturbed natural areas, in order to enjoy and appreciate nature (and any accompanying cultural features – both past and present) that promotes conservation, has low negative impact and provides for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of the local populations.
Table 1 Comparison of Selected Ecotourism and Nature Tourism Definition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main principles of definition</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interest in nature</td>
<td>x x x x x x x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contributes to conservation</td>
<td>x x x x x x x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reliance on parks and protected areas</td>
<td>x x x x x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benefits local people/long-term benefits</td>
<td>x x x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education and study</td>
<td>x x x x x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low impact/non-consumptive</td>
<td>x x x x x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethics/responsibility</td>
<td>x x x x x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management</td>
<td>x x x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sustainable</td>
<td>x x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enjoyment/appreciation</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adventure</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small scale</td>
<td>x x</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 Cahalin-Lacruins (1987); 2 Laamanen Dure (1987); 3 Halvorsen (1989); 4 Kuroy (1989); 5 Ziff (1989); 6 Fennell and Eagles (1990); 7 CEAC (1997); 8 Valentine (1993); 9 The Ecotourism Society (ed); 10 Western (1995); 11 Australian National Ecotourism Strategy (ed); 12 Brandon (1996); 13 Goodwin (1996); 14 Wallace and Pierce (1996); 15 Page and Dowling (2002).

From the discussion, it can be argued that any number of principles of ecotourism can be devised. However, an analysis of definitions such as those above indicates that the three dimensions, as argued by Beaumont (1998), represent the main essence of ecotourism concept. It is useful for this research to consider the range of definitions offered in terms of the conceptual approaches they represent to avoid confusion that has surrounds the concept of ecotourism to date (Table 1).

Sustainable Tourism

As mentioned earlier, the concept of sustainable tourism is inextricably linked to the ethic of sustainable development (Mathieson and Wall, 1982; Farrell and McLellan, 1987). It is suggested that sustainable tourism incorporates most of the key features of sustainable development. Among the first advocates of a sustainable development approach to tourism were Mathieson and Wall (1982) who compiled their treatise on tourism’s economic, physical and social impacts since planning for tourist development is a complex process which should involve a consideration of diverse economic, environmental and social structures. In his advocacy of a community approach to tourism planning, Murphy (1985) also concluded that tourism planning needs to be restructured so that environmental and social factors may be placed alongside economic considerations. Getz (1986) approached the situation from his investigation of tourism planning models and indicated that reference to theoretical models will remind tourism planners not to act in isolation from other forms of social, economic and environmental planning.

During the late 1980s, the sustainable development approach to tourism planning was advanced by a number of authors (Inskeep, 1987, 1988; Gunn, 1987, 1988; Pearce, 1989;
Romeril, 1989a, b). Most authors agreed that the underlying concept of sustainable tourism development is the equating of tourism development with ecological and social responsibility. Its aim is to meet the needs of the present tourists and host regions while protecting and enhancing environmental, social and economic values for the future. Sustainable tourism development is envisaged as leading to management of all resources in such a way that it can fulfil economic, social and aesthetic needs while maintaining cultural integrity, essential ecological processes, biological diversity and life support systems (Page and Dowling, 2002). As a result, the concept of sustainability has become a mediating term in bridging the ideological and political differences between the environmental and development lobbies, a bridge between the fundamentally opposed paradigms of eco- and anthropocentrism (Wearing and Neil, 1999).

Despite its currency, Butler (1993) contests the use of the term sustainable tourism, arguing that it implies the maintenance of tourism itself, whatever its impacts, rather than maintenance of the human or physical context within which the tourism occurs. Accordingly, Butler advocates the term ‘sustainable tourism development’, entailing:

‘Tourism which is developed and maintained in an area (community, environment) in such a manner and at such a scale that it remains viable over an indefinite period and does not degrade or alter the environment (human and physical) in which it exists to such a degree that it prohibits the successful development and well being of other activities and processes’ (Butler, 1993, p. 29).

Thus, sustainable tourism is conceived as a form of tourism that facilitates sustainable development. Some researchers equate sustainable tourism with ‘alternative tourism’ (Pigram, 1990), although it seems clear that most, if not all, modes of tourism can be potentially sustainable in the sustainable development sense, if managed in an appropriate way within suitable settings. This perception is related to the dominance at that time of the so-called ‘cautionary’ and ‘adaptancy’ approach platforms (Jafari, 1989), which posited that mass or large-scale tourism was inherently unsustainable. However, the ‘knowledge-based’ platform, which became dominant in the 1990s, de-emphasised the relationship between scale and impact. According to this view, small-scale or alternative tourism can be basically positive or negative in terms of destination impact, depending on where it is implemented and how it is managed, and the same can be said about mass tourism. Hence, the notion of sustainability was extended right across the entire spectrum of tourism activity, and not confined just to the small-scale end of that continuum (Clarke, 1997). The logic of the extension also derives from the simple observation that tourism as a whole cannot be sustainable unless mass tourism is made sustainable, since that component by definition accounts for and will continue to account for the great majority of all tourism activity.

### Sustainable Ecotourism

Wight (1993), taking an ethics-based perspective, enumerates several principles considered fundamental to sustainable ecotourism, as indicated below. Wight (1993) further argues that these principles may be extended, in greater or lesser degree, into other tourism operations in addition to ecotourism, which could have the effect of reorienting mainstream tourism operations in the direction of greater sustainability.

- It should not degrade the resource and should be developed in an environmentally sound manner.
- It should provide first-hand, participatory and enlightening experiences.
It should involve education among all parties – local communities, government, non-governmental organisations, industry and tourists (before, during and after the trip).

It should encourage all-party recognition of the intrinsic values of the resource.

It should involve acceptance of the resource on its own terms, and in recognition of its limits, which involves supply-oriented management.

It should promote understanding and involve partnerships between many players, which could include government, non-government organisations, industry, scientist and locals (both before and during operations).

It should promote moral and ethical responsibilities and behaviour towards the natural and cultural environment, by all players.

It should provide long-term benefits – to the resource, to the local community, and to industry (benefits may be conservation, scientific, social, cultural or economic).

Ecotourism operations should ensure that the underlying ethics of responsible environmental practices are applied both to the external (natural and cultural) resources, which attract the tourists and to the internal operations.

To illustrate a more sustainable model of ecotourism, Wight expanded Sadler’s (1990) sustainable development systems model and incorporated the central principles of ecotourism. The model demonstrates an approach where all three spheres (environmental, economic and social) must have goals fulfilled for there to be a balance, which is required for a possibility of sustainability. Ecotourism is still a relatively young industry, yet there are already well-documented cases of unsustainable ecotourism operations due to the fact that principles fundamental to ecotourism are not being incorporated into the conception, planning, design, development, operation, or marketing of the product (Boo, 1991; Lindberg & Hawkins, 1993).

It is clear from the above discussion that ‘the concept of ecotourism is still often used synonymously with that of sustainable tourism. In reality, ecotourism fits within the larger concept of sustainable tourism (Ceballos-Lascurain, 1998, p.8). And, herein lies a conundrum. It could be argued that ecotourism is a niche form of tourism that fosters sustainable development principles. That is, the former is a ‘type’ of tourism to which the latter is an approach, or it is a ‘process’ that drives tourism. Thus, ecotourism encompasses sustainability principles and in fact should be regarded as the exemplar of the sustainability approach within tourism generally (Fennell and Dowling, 2003).

Research Methodology

As indicated earlier, many research findings on variable impact of ecotourism in several less developed countries indicate that domestic participation is limited and the number in a community who are directly affected is negligible (Weaver, 1998). Two contributing factors are: 1) there are structural, operational and cultural limitations to community participation in tourism development process (Tosun, 2000), and 2) the direct revenue of ecotourism industry is constrained by the dominance of PCPD (popular, casual, passive, diversionary) ecotourists, whose expenditures within the protected areas or in adjacent communities tend to be minimal. As a result, many ecotourism operations in developing countries are dependent upon the existence of a well-developed mass-tourism sector in order to remain viable. By adopting a qualitative case study approach, this research conducted a total of 81 in-depth interviews among town and country planners, government officers, non-governmental organisations, managers of park operations and local people, in its attempts to examine two case study areas in Malaysia and to justify whether it is necessary to use the term ‘mass ecotourism’, to describe the increasingly common intersection of sustainable mass-tourism and non-consumptive nature tourism.
**Background of Ecotourism Sites**

Primary data for the research was obtained at two selected ecotourism sites in Malaysia: the Perlis State Park (PSP) in Wang Kelian, Perlis and the proposed State Eco-park in Ulu Muda, Kedah. Both ecosites are selected because they have not only superb natural assets, but also they are ranked among the ten very special places for Malaysian ecotourism out of 52 project suggestions identified in the National Ecotourism Plan.

Comprising two forest reserves in the state of Perlis – Mata Ayer and Wang Mu – PSP protects 5,075 hectares of geological, ecological and historical importance (Osman, *et al.*, 2002). It is a unique conservation area of limestone-dominated ecosystems shaped by geography and climate, and it harbours the country’s only semi-deciduous forest, endangered and threatened mammals, and a treasure-trove of underground cave passages, many of which were once mined. The park is also the Peninsula’s first trans-frontier protected area, together with Thailand’s Thaleban National Park, which it joins at the border. Considering that the PSP comprises half the total forest reserve land in the state, the move to gazette the area shows state government commitment in protecting valuable natural and cultural resources. Now managed by the State Park Unit under the state Forestry Department, the park has been carefully developed according to management plans drawn up with consultants World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) and funding from the Danish International Development Assistance (DANIDA).

Meanwhile, the Ulu Muda forests are located in the eastern part of Kedah and are part of a forest area that stretches well into Thai territory. Similar to Perlis State Park, its flora and fauna incorporate a large degree of the so-called ‘northern element’ due to its northern locality, i.e., biological components of Continental and Mainland Asia, as well as the Sundaland elements found further to the south. The overall biodata of the Ulu Muda forests is distinct from other parts of Malaysia and include a large Thai-Burmese component. While some of the forests in the Greater Ulu Muda area have been logged, enough primary forest remains to be able to consider Ulu Muda a ‘High Conservation Value Forest’ (UPEN Kedah and WWF Malaysia, 2002). Apart from providing essential habitat for some of the region’s more spectacular, significant and endangered wildlife, the forest itself is important in many other ways such as water catchment, climate regulation and pest control. To enhance these values and ensure sustainability of these resources, various initiatives have highlighted the significance of the Ulu Muda forests and recommended for its adoption as a State Park or State ‘Eco’ Park.

The development of PSP has direct impacts on two local communities: Kampung Wang Kelian and Kaki Bukit. Kampung Wang Kelian is a homogeneous Malay community with a population of 200 people. Most of its people are farmers working in paddy fields, rubber smallholdings, orchards and vegetable farms besides rearing chicken and breeding fish. Kaki Bukit, with a population of 3,000, is the main town outside PSP. The people of this community are descended from tin-miners who used to work in mining activities in caves that ceased operations in the 1970s. They are currently involved in small businesses and agricultural practices.

In Ulu Muda, there are several villages located on both sides of the main road leading to the forest area, dam, natural attractions and resorts. The villages are Kampung Surau, Kampung Pinang, Kampung Bukit Berangan, Kampung Belantik Dalam, Kampung Belantik Luar and Kampung Kota Aur. The population is approximately 3,000 people, all of them are Malays. They are mainly involved in paddy farming, rubber smallholdings, animal husbandry and fishing activities.
Findings of Research

In general, the study has indicated that the level of local involvement in ecotourism is low in the PSP and Ulu Muda, and types of involvement are restricted to a few economic activities such as menial and unskilled jobs, part-time nature guides, seasonal boat guides and home-visit programmes. In the literature, research findings on variable impact of ecotourism in several less developed countries by Weaver (1998) also indicate that domestic participation is limited and the number in a community who are directly affected is negligible. Similarly, a recent study on ecotourism employment in Lower Kinabatangan River, Sabah, Malaysia, suggests that the level of community involvement is relatively low because resort operators do not integrate their activities with the local residents (Syed Khalid Wafa et al., 2005).

The above situation can be explained by the various limitations to community participation in tourism development process that exist in the PSP and Ulu Muda. Among the limitations are lack of capital, skills and knowledge, lack of awareness of tourism potential, complacency in attitudes among local people, who are more interested in immediate returns. Tosun (2000) notes that there are operational, structural and cultural limitations to community participation in tourism, and the degrees of limitation tend to exhibit higher intensity in developing countries than in developed countries – Malaysia is no exception. With specific reference to the homestays in Wang Kelian, as an example, the local people are unable to participate effectively because the conditions of their houses do not meet the required minimum standard to qualify for the programme. At the same time, the PSFD (Perlis State Forestry Department) has put the programme on hold because it is in conflict with the PSFD’s policy to increase park revenue through accommodation. This clearly indicates there are operational and structural impediments to community involvement in the homestay programme in Wang Kelian.

Due to the above limitations, it is important to recognise that local involvement in tourism activities is dependent, to a large extent, upon government initiatives. The injection of large-scale development by the state government is necessary to foster tourism and materialise community-led tourism in both areas (Stevens, 1995). In fact, the development of the State Park, a new tourist town, border tourism and resorts are government-initiated because tourism planning approach in Malaysia is generally government-led. The joint-cooperation and mutual agreement between the state government of Perlis and the Thai government to ease border crossings has helped to boost tourism in the PSP, particularly in the border market area. Even the private resorts in Ulu Muda were built through incentives from the state government of Kedah.

It is reasonable to postulate that the profile of ecotourism in the PSP and Ulu Muda is dependent upon the existence of a well-developed mass-tourism sector, such as the development of the border market in Wang Kelian and the establishment of several resorts in Ulu Muda. Butler (1991) argues that true wilderness tourism has poor economic potential. Developing an area solely on the basis of pure ecotourism is a risky proposition. On the other hand, the mass-tourism sector has the potential to achieve economies of scale and ‘critical mass’ in terms of visitor number. Hence, it may be even necessary, according to Weaver (1998), to use the term ‘mass ecotourism’ to describe the increasingly common intersection of sustainable mass-tourism and non-consummptive nature tourism. The challenge for ecotourism and park planners is to foster mutually beneficial linkages between the two sectors and to avoid a situation where the negative traits of mass tourism are simply transferred to other venues. It would be unrealistic to expect that ecotourism could provide an alternative to mass tourism in many cases as this would put undue pressure on very fragile ecological areas (Scheyvens, 2002). Therefore, it is essential for the implementing agencies
to adopt a comprehensive development plan and appropriate management strategies to cater for the different land use and different types of visitors – ‘hard’ versus ‘soft’ ecotourists.

Another critical challenge for ecotourism and park planners is to adopt a standard definition and policy that regulate ecotourism operations in this country. The findings have clearly indicated there is a range of definitions that has surrounded the concept of ecotourism, and different stakeholders are adopting different perspectives particularly the local communities. The confusion among local people to clearly understand the term adds to the complexity of trying to define the ecotourism term, and the attempt to materialise community-based ecotourism under the present situation will be made more difficult to accomplish.

Environmental education, which is one of three main principles of ecotourism, is important to create nature awareness among the tourists especially when the study has indicated that both areas are over-dependent on mass tourists and soft ecotourists. It can also help reduce resource exploitation due to lack of environmental awareness among the local communities. Informational signage and guided-informational story telling tours are a few examples of visitor management strategies that can enhance this awareness. The use of a visitor centre at the PSP’s headquarters, which is presently underutilised, should also be maximised as it is an important avenue to disseminate information to the public. In addition to environmental education, regular patrolling and heavy imposition of fines are necessary to discourage ‘hardcore’ offenders from committing similar encroachment offenses. In the case of Ulu Muda, this can be done efficiently if the relevant government agencies would coordinate their efforts, streamline their operations and avoid overlapping programmes and inconsistency of policies.

While government initiatives are necessary to foster tourism in both areas, the state governments of Perlis and Kedah should be aware of the minimal tourist leakages to local communities due to the infancy stage of tourism development and enclave development of the State Park and resorts. Upon completion, the development of a new tourist town in Wang Kelian will further limit local participation in business as a result of land and property price inflation. It is indicated in the findings that some local people already perceive this new development as being external especially when outside monopoly is allowed to increase. The level of external involvement is expected to increase further because the state government has proposed to build a duty-free complex in Wang Kelian. This proposed development is inappropriate and at odds with the overall development concept of PSP because it promotes foreign goods and ‘internationalisation’ of ecotourism. Despite producing national ecotourism plans and strategies, Lindber et al. (1998) argue that some developing countries have not effectively followed up on these documents – lack of government continuity being one of the major obstacles; the above phenomenon is one classic example. This supports Butler’s (2004) contention that there is lack of implementation in management because plans are produced as mandatory exercises. Furthermore, there is evidence from this study to support Butler’s concern that many destinations areas manage tourism facilities for the sake of tourists and tourist activities, instead of managing the natural and human environment in a way that permits it to contribute to tourism.

Conclusion

This paper has introduced the concept of ecotourism and its relationship to sustainable tourism and sustainable ecotourism. At its best, when sustainably managed and when it involves environmental education, conservation of resources and empowerment of local people through direct benefits and control over ecotourism activities, ecotourism can provide an excellent example of sustainable development in practice. However, successful
management of ecotourism operations benefits when it is coupled with active participation of local people in the planning process in order to achieve the development goals of ecotourism.

References


