

INTROP: Highlight

ECOTOURISM: DIMENSION OF SUSTAINABILITY

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Ecotourism often involves small-scale tourism oriented to natural areas, wildlife, and traditional culture. In general, ecotourism contributes to rural economies in addition to maintaining land in its natural state. There are many definitions of ecotourism. It is typically defined as travel to destinations where the flora, fauna and cultural heritage are the primary attractions. It is, however, defined in various ways by different groups of people with different agendas. At its simplest, ecotourism can be described as interpretative tourism, where conservation, understanding and appreciation of the environment and cultures visited is sought.

Ecotourism is a subset of nature-based tourism (Beaumont, 2001). The Ecotourism Association of Australia (1992) defined ecotourism as 'ecologically sustainable tourism that fosters environmental and cultural understanding, appreciation and conservation'. The International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN) has provided the definition of ecotourism and this definition has adopted by many countries which is stated 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 visitor impact and provides the beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local populations. (Ceballos-Lascurain [1996]).

Wearing and Neil (1999) identified four fundamental elements in defining ecotourism. The first element was the notion of movement or travel from one location to another. In other words, as ecotourism's emphasis is on experiencing natural areas, travel should be restricted to protected and undisturbed natural areas. Filion et al. (1994) have defined ecotourism as a form of tourism which allows tourists to enjoy and appreciate nature. In order to sustain ecotourism, its relationship to natural resources must be identified. Ecotourism is closely related to the resources on which it ultimately depends.

The next element is nature-based. Commonwealth Department of Tourism (1994:17) defines ecotourism as 'nature-based tourism that involves education and interpretation of the natural environment and is managed to be ecologically sustainable'. According to this definition, one of the components of ecotourism is that it is nature-based, besides being environmentally-educative and sustainably-managed. The third element is conservation. Blangy and Wood (1993:32) have defined ecotourism

as 'Responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and sustains the well-being of local people'. Under the terms of this definition, ecotourism will encourage ecotourism by bringing an appropriate return to the local community and encouraging the conservation of resources in the long term. The final element is the educative role. Wight (1994) notes that the educational principle in ecotourism should involve all parties, including local communities, governmental and non-governmental organisations, industries and tourists.

Ecotourism is closely related to the concept of sustainable tourism; has the potential to provide a sustainable approach to development in such destinations as national parks and protected areas. Inskeep (1991) added that ecotourism balances economic benefits and a reduction in environmental stress factors, and so fits in with the conditions for sustainable tourism. Most researchers have identified one of the criteria of ecotourism as sustainability. Fennell (1999:43) asserted:

Ecotourism is a sustainable form of natural resource-based tourism that focuses primarily on experiencing and learning about nature, and which is ethically managed to be low-impact, non-consumptive, and locally oriented (control, benefits, and scale). It typically occurs in natural areas, and



Fact
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should contribute to the conservation or preservation of such areas.

Sustainability has become a catch-phrase and the use of the word has attracted various groups and individuals. Sustainability comes from the verb 'sustain,' which means to hold up, to bear, to support, to provide for, to maintain, to sanction, to keep going, to keep up, to prolong, to support the life of. Mowforth and Munt (1998:22) stated that sustainability is 'a word that is defined, interpreted and imagined differently between individuals, organisations and social groups'. They added that essentially, sustainability is related with two basic concepts: concern for the environment and natural resources. Harris and Leiper (1995: xix) further asserted sustainability as 'the existence of ecological and social conditions necessary to support human life at a certain level of well-being through future generations'.

According to Butler (1998) ecotourism, when linked to sustainable development, can be interpreted as relating to economic sustainability, ecological sustainability, the long-term viability of tourism, and accepting tourism as part of an overall strategy for sustainable development and biodiversity conservation in protected areas. Blamey (2001) finds that two principles of sustainability are commonly highlighted in ecotourism: namely support for local economies and support of conservation. Several authors, such as Dowling (1998) and the Ecotourism Association of Australia (1992) emphasise the sustainable component in the definition of ecotourism. To achieve ecotourism and sustainable development at the same time, there is a need for an effective development plan for natural ecosystems, cultural resources and protected areas. Proper management, conservation and resource maintenance is a vital element in the viability and long-term sustainability of ecotourism.

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Profile



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