

21 Ecotourist experience: myth or reality?

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Abstract

What does and does not characterize the ecotourism experience has been subject to sustained inspection by academics for the better part of three decades. Numerous monographs and scholarly articles have sought to articulate typologies and conceptual framings of the ecotourist, framings that are then used as the basis for a seemingly never-ending array of empirical studies. However, can we ever say what the ecotourism experience is or isn't? The title of this chapter *Ecotourism Experience: Myth and Reality* taps into varied perceptions amongst ecotourists and others that are elucidated in this chapter over what should be considered the outcomes of a particular tourism form. Beyond this, however, it also taps into a wider theme; can we ever indisputably define the ecotourist when the nature of the ecotourist experience varies temporally based on the social and ecological mores of the society that practises it?

Introduction

Whilst precise figures are hard to come by, the OECD has estimated that ecotourists collectively account for 7% of all international tourist arrivals (101 million ecotourist arrivals in 2018; see The World Counts, 2020). Throughout 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic has presented an existential threat to the future of global travel (see Gössling, Scott & Hall, 2020; Sharma & Nicolau, 2020; Uğur & Akbıyık, 2020), ecotourism and other supposedly more 'responsible'

forms of travel (see Chiu, Lee & Chen, 2014) are perceived to have grown in importance. That is, national associations, such as Ecotourism Australia (see Cardona, 2020), and members of the academic community (e.g. Cherkaoui, Boukherouk, Lakhal, Aghzar & El Youssfi, 2020) have been searching for ways to reset the economic growth trajectory of the tourism industry whilst avoiding the continued perpetuation of the worst impacts of so-called Overtourism. This has been occurring at the same time that ecotourism operators have been heavily impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. More specifically, the loss of ecotourist revenue in areas such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Australia, and Africa has threatened the financial viability of ongoing conservation programmes (see O' Flynn, Schweinsberg and Wearing, 2021, for a discussion of protected area financing), as well as posing a threat to the health of the Great Apes and other parts of the ecotourism product mix (Greenfield & Muiruri, 2020; Holmes, 2020; Luke, 2020). However, with well-managed community-based ecotourism (see Wearing, McDonald, Schweinsberg, Chatterton & Bainbridge, 2020), the opportunity exists for the sector, as in the case of the Mara Naboisho Conservancy (Naboisho, 2020), to empower local communities and provide them with a 'chance to have a stake in their own societies – often for the first time' (Zurab Pololikashvili, UNWTO Secretary-General, in UNWTO, 2020a).

National parks and other ecotourism destinations have long been recognized as having health benefits for visitors and society at large (James, Christiana & Battista, 2019; Runte, 1997). For example, Wen, Kozak, Yang, and Liu (2020) have argued that, as the industry responds to the COVID-1 health pandemic, Chinese tourists might look to participate in nature-based travel activities to 'breathe fresh air, connect with something greater than themselves and rejuvenate after the stress of the outbreak'. However, nature-based tourism and ecotourism are distinct in that the former:

Encompasses all forms of tourism – mass tourism, adventure tourism, low impact tourism, ecotourism – which use natural resources in a wild or undeveloped form – including species, habitat, landscape, scenery and salt and fresh water features. Nature tourism is travel for the purpose of enjoying undeveloped natural areas or wildlife.

(Goodwin, 1995 cited in Fennell, 2013: 328)

Ecotourism in contrast is:

Low impact nature tourism, which contributes to the maintenance of species and habitats either directly through a contribution to conservation and/ or indirectly by providing revenue to the local community sufficient for local people to value, and therefore protect, their wildlife heritage area as a source of income.

(Goodwin, 1995,cited in Fennell, 2013: 328)

The question of what an ecotourist is looking for by way of experiences in a COVID-19 world is exacerbated by the notion that, even prior to the pandemic, there was an understanding that we are living in an Anthropocene age and that ecotourism must be willing to address some of the inherent contradictions in its existence. As Fletcher (2019) has argued, ecotourism is an essentially capitalist activity and we must think carefully whether we can continue to advocate for its growth (even as a response to COVID-19) whilst accepting that growth will eventually overwhelm the last vestiges of nature that serve as ecotourism's *raison d'être*. As Fletcher (2019) also notes, ecotourism's growth trajectory is driven by the demands of consumers. It is ecotourists who are at the heart of the present chapter.

The International Ecotourism Society (hereafter IES) defines ecotourism as 'responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people, and

involves interpretation and education' (IES, 1995/ 2020). Within these broad parameters, a range of scholarly works have attempted to define what is and is not an ecotourist (e.g. Fennell, 2015b; Page & Dowling, 2001; Wearing & Neil, 2009; Wearing & Schweinsberg, 2018; Weaver, 2011). Attempts to define an ecotourist often involve efforts to account for a virtually limitless set of motivations, socio-demographic and other characteristics and to develop an adaptable ecotourist typology. In this chapter, we will argue that such efforts are of limited value, not simply because the ecotourism market is inherently heterogeneous (see Sharpley, 2006) but because the boundaries of 'ecotourism' and the 'ecotourist' evolve temporally to reflect the evolving standards of the society that practises them. Ecotourism, as indeed all tourism, exists as part of a system that is complex and subject to the effects of evolving stakeholder relations and attitudes to the natural, social, and economic world (Baggio, 2008).

The ecotourist experience

Moscardo (2009, cited in Moscardo, 2015: 294) has defined a tourist experience as comprising 'a distinct set of events and/ or activities, occurring in a particular location and within a specific time period, outside of the everyday realm, that provide meaning and significance to the tourist's identity and social interactions'. Whilst Fennell (2020) has argued that modern ecotourism and sustainable development dialogues emerged simultaneously from societal debates around eco-development in 1970s and 1980s, Dowling (2013) has observed that earlier antecedents of ecotourism included the journeys of geographers and writers into 'new' areas in the eighteenth century, including the national parks of the United States and Canada (e.g. Yellowstone and Banff), through to African wildlife safaris and Himalayan treks in the mid-twentieth century. The fact that ecotourism has evolved throughout its history on the basis of a changing understanding

of society's relationship to nature (see also Hall, Gössling & Scott, 2015) means that it is not possible to generalize with respect to the ecotourist experience. How one frames an ecotourist experience will be particular to one's background, motivations, and goals in travelling. As President Theodore Roosevelt once said in relation to his famed camping trip with the environmentalist John Muir in 1903, which helped precipitate the development of the National Parks Service in 1916:

I trust I need not tell you (Muir), my dear sir, how happy were the days in the Yosemite I owed to you, and how greatly I appreciated them. I shall never forget our three camps; the first in the solemn temple of the great sequoias; the next in the snow storm among the silver firs near the brink of the cliff; and the third on the floor of the Yosemite, in the open valley fronting the stupendous rocky mass of El Capitan with the falls thundering in the distance on either hand.

(Roosevelt, 1903)

Or alternatively, as David Newsome¹ observed in relation to a trip to the Hurulu Ecopark and Biosphere Reserve in Sri Lanka:

A jeep/tourist/permit is required to enter the reserve, and when cleared for entry as many as 30 vehicles depart and enter the park at approximately the same time and then split off along a network of tracks in search of elephants. When elephants are located, there is close approach at sightings and frequently 10–12 vehicles in attendance ... During the sightings elephants were clearly disturbed as evidenced by the aggressive behaviour directed towards closest vehicles. In one case an attack on a vehicle was witnessed and the vehicle was damaged. The occupants of the vehicle said they had found the incident very stressful. Also at sightings there was significant engine noise and the smell of exhaust fumes. Some drivers switched off their

engines during a sighting; others in close proximity did not. There seemed to be no rules or protocols regarding the viewing of wildlife and certainly no interpretation ...

(Newsome, 2013: 213)

As the quote from Roosevelt demonstrates, ecotourism offers opportunities for close and often ephemeral experiences with nature and, when integrated with visitor interpretation and wider destination management approaches, there exists the opportunity to develop truly sustainable ecotourism enterprises (see Bramwell & Lane, 1993; Orams, 1996; Pearce & Moscardo, 1998; Staiff, Bushell & Kennedy, 2002; Wearing & Schweinsberg, 2018). Ham (2016) describes three endgames from interpretation programmes: interpretation as teaching, interpretation as provocation, and interpretation as entertainment. What this demonstrates is that whilst the ecotourism industry may generally attract people that have a higher level of environmental awareness and concern in comparison with mass tourists (see Lee & Moscardo, 2005), we cannot at the same time forget that as much as ecotourism is said to be about environmental protection and conservation, it is also about pleasure (Fennell, 2018). Perhaps nowhere is this tension between conservation and pleasure more evident than around elephant treks in localities such as Thailand, Botswana, and Sri Lanka. Indeed, Duffy and Moore (2010: 738) have argued that such practices have ‘extended and deepened neoliberalism [as it relates to ecotourism] by targeting and opening up new frontiers in nature’. Criticized on an animal welfare front and the perceived need for many in the industry to methodically torture the animals in an effort to make them more docile and able to interact with tourists (see Tourism Concern, n.d.), Schweinsberg and Darcy (2022a) have recently argued that local-scale ecotourist transport options represent an under investigated perspective in ecotourism management. However, for all of their negative impacts, who are we to say in a publication such as this that elephant rides should not occur? Tourists are

paying good money for an experience, which even Tourism Concern (n.d.) acknowledges are ‘intelligent, social and emotional. In many ways it is the equivalent experience to swimming with dolphins’. Certainly, all sentient creatures need to be treated with the same dignity and respect that we ourselves would expect. However, simply stopping the practice of elephant rides has presented its own challenges; for example, what is to be done with captive elephants when there are no more visitors (see Segarra, 2020 for a discussion of captive elephant management during COVID-19)? There is also the added complication that many of those local workers responsible for cruelty to elephants are often migrant workers who themselves are also subject to abuse and overwork by those in positions of authority (Cadigan, 2016).

The IES (2020) has argued that well-managed ecotourism offers travellers opportunities for immersive experiences of nature that can cultivate greater levels of understanding and potentially cultivate a stewardship and leadership mentality (see Schweinsberg, Heizmann, Darcy, Wearing & Djolic, 2018 for a discussion on sustainability leadership). However, as the elephant trek example illustrates, ecotourist’s concern for sustainability principles is often a perspective more honoured in the breach than in the observance. Academics and industry cling to the myth of ecotourism as inherently sustainable and good for the environment (see McKercher & Prideaux, 2014), but is this really the reality? Dolnicar, Yanamandram, and Juvan (2013) have noted that there is value in the scientific community being able to rationalize what constitutes an ecotourist, as it is only with consensus on this most fundamental of questions that advancements can occur around sustainable ecotourism management. We do not disagree with this assertion, but would also observe that an ecotourist must also be seen in his or her historical context. In the historical case of Theodore Roosevelt/ John Muir, which is referred to later in this chapter, we can see the early emergence of themes that have come to characterize contemporary discussions of

ecotourism's sustainability potential. This includes Muir seeing tourism in national parks as not necessarily something to be lauded but rather as a lesser economic evil when seen in relation to cattle grazing and the commercial clear-cutting of native forest (see Hall, 2010, cited in Wearing & Schweinsberg, 2018). We can also see that whilst the principal protagonist/ consumer, the President of the United States, was perhaps not a committed ecotourist when seen through a contemporary lens, it is nonetheless the case that the actions and behaviours of travellers are never one-dimensional. Roosevelt, it may be said, was an ecotourist of his time as well as a hunter. How travellers manage the multiple independent attributes that collectively characterize their identity will go a long way to determining their sustainability potential.

The sustainable ecotourist

Ecotourism, rightly or wrongly, is a form of tourism that is often treated as being synonymous with notions of sustainability (see Blamey, 2001; Butcher, 2005 for competing perspectives on this issue). However, as Sharpley (2020) has demonstrated, in the past 20 years of scholarly commentary on sustainable tourism, there has been a shift in perspective towards de-growth as a mechanism for understanding the boundaries of sustainable tourism growth (see Fletcher, Murray Mas, Blanco-Romero and Blázquez-Salom, 2019 for a discussion of ecotourism de-growth). If such a change in perspective can occur in a few decades, what can we say about our understanding of what does and does not constitute a sustainable ecotourist over the centuries? Tribe and Liburd (2016) situated history as one of a collection of viewpoints from the arts and humanities that help us comprehend tourism as a complex world making phenomenon and practice through which intercultural understandings and expression unfold. Modern ecotourism is, as we have said, a twentieth-century phenomenon with its origins in the alternative tourism movement that emerged alongside global sustainable development discourse. However, as

Wearing and Schweinsberg (2018) demonstrated with respect to the trip that Roosevelt made with Muir into what is now Yosemite National Park in 1903, the antecedents of modern ecotourism potentially go back a lot further in time and must be viewed through the particulars of the time in which they occurred. Fletcher (2014), for example, has argued that modern ecotourists are similar to colonial explorers on account of their interest in the act of exploring and the opportunities that are afforded to them for thrill and adventure, often in the footsteps of earlier colonial explorers (see also Holden & Sparrowhawk, 2002; Wearing, van der Duim & Schweinsberg, 2007). The notion of ecotourism as a traveller fantasy (see Fletcher, 2014) is important for the present discussion on account of the insights that it gives into a traveller's motivation; as Urry and Larsen (2011: 3) argue:

Places are chosen to be gazed upon because there is anticipation, especially through daydreaming and fantasy, of intense pleasures, either on a different scale or involving different senses from those customarily encountered. Such anticipation is constructed and sustained through a variety of non-tourist technologies, such as film, TV, literature, magazines, CDs, DVDs and videos, constructing and reinforcing the gaze.

Roosevelt was said at the time to be very familiar with the writings of Muir, the instigator of his ecotourist experience. In the course of penning an appreciation piece reminiscing after Muir's death, Roosevelt demonstrated that he was not only well-versed in the power of Muir's writings but that he also had knowledge of the work of Muir's contemporary and intellectual sparring partner, Ralph Waldo Emerson (Roosevelt, 1915). Today, the ecotourist experience is similarly brought to the attention of consumers through mechanisms including travel writing, marketing, travel narration, and social media (see Cheng, Wong, Wearing & McDonald, 2017; Maier, 2011; Schweinsberg and Darcy, 2022b; Schweinsberg, Wearing, Kuhn & Grabowski, 2013; Wearing,

Schweinsberg & Johnson, 2019). With ecotourists being the ultimate recipients of a marketing message, the choices travellers make will have profound implications for the sustainability of the wider ecotourism system. Schweinsberg and Darcy (2022a: 47) have recently argued with respect to what is now a global ecotourism transportation network that whilst we must never deny the negative environmental impacts of different transport forms, we must also recognise that ‘the right to free movement and mobility for all is assured under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights’. Resolving these two often competing considerations is not easy; it is, however, essential if ecotourism is to live up to the principles of sustainability that it is often seen as being synonymous with. It is a task made all the more complicated if there is apathy amongst ecotourists. Fennell (2015a: 95) refers to such apathy as ‘Akrasia’; where a tourist demonstrates a ‘deficient capacity to contain or restrain one’s desires, broadly conceived; where the anticipation of pleasure overwhelms good judgement’.

Understanding the lived experience of ecotourists is, therefore, central to our ability to manage the industry. Much as President Roosevelt entered Yosemite in advance of the provision of what we would categorize as modern visitor infrastructure, so too did early ecotourism demand in the 1990s proceed industry and scholarly understanding. As Diamantis (1998: 515) has observed:

This growth of demand for ecotourism initially ran ahead of the supply of its products, and created a new challenge for tourism researchers and scholars. In particular, the consumer-driven demand for ecotourism created a dis-equilibrium in academic circles. For example, there are now uncertainties and confusions both in terms of the definition of ecotourism and also in the enumeration of its fundamental principles; confusions which in part are derived from a lack of understanding of the behaviour of ecotourists. Indeed, it can be suggested that until the behaviour of ecotourists is fully explored, it will continue to be difficult to clarify the concept of ecotourism.

Wearing and Schweinsberg (2018) argue that President Roosevelt was an ecotourist because, amongst other things, his time with Muir afforded him the opportunity to be educated on the nature of the Californian environment. Many of the sites he visited are now popular with ecotourist travellers today, including the Coast Redwoods (*sequoia sempervirens*) in California's Redwood National Park, which, along with other species including Australia's Mountain Ash (*eucalyptus regnans*), have been identified as being important for biodiversity preservation and tourism-based economic development (see Hall, James and Baird, 2011). With national parks being home to some of the world's most iconic tourism landscapes, the challenge for ecotourism managers becomes how to 'create a link between people and the environment, working to instil realistic expectations in the minds of visitors and managing expectations in light of conservation realities' (Wearing, Schweinsberg & Tower, 2016: 66). What constitutes a realistic expectation will evolve over time; as Fletcher (2015: 338) has argued, 'the practice of ecotourism is informed by a particular ecotourist gaze'. Therefore, it is on the basis of experience, and a writer's characterization of that experience that reality and myths are framed.

McKercher and Prideaux (2014: 17) observe that a myth can be characterized as 'demonstrably false beliefs that are widely held, long standing and never subjected to deep inspection'. Whilst we would never suggest that academics have been hesitant to subject the ecotourist and more generally the tourist to 'deep inspection', we suggest it is the case that arbitrarily characterizing any belief as 'demonstrably false' runs the risk of subjecting the thinking of people from the past to introspection based on the values and attitudes of the present. Was President Roosevelt on that camping trip to Yosemite with the environmentalist John Muir in the early twentieth century indicative of the values and priorities of an ideal ecotourist, which Weaver and Lawton had in their hard/ soft ecotourist typology (see Weaver & Lawton, 2002) in the early twenty-first

century? Probably not. However, does it matter? Whether it is an academic typology or conceptual model (e.g. Wang, Weaver, Li & Zhang, 2016) or a historical event, the power of a myth lies in its ability to shape society's future understanding. There will likely never be a definition of an ecotourist that will universally stand the test of time. Rather, what constitutes an 'ideal' ecotourist will evolve in relation to changing societal expectations regarding the role of tourism more broadly in society. History will then tell us whether an earlier understanding will likely have any salience into the future.

Evolving ecotourist typologies

When Ceballos-Lascurain composed what is widely held to be the first definition of ecotourism –

... 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.

(Ceballos-Lascurain, 1987: 13)

he suggested that ecotourists possessed 'an awareness and knowledge about the natural environment and cultural aspects, in such a way that will convert him or her into somebody keenly involved in conservation issues' (Caballos-Lascurian, 1991: 25, cited in Diamantis, 1999: 96). This definition made sense in the context of a period of human history where, as Sharpley (2020) notes, tourism scholars were beginning to recognize the worst excesses of mass tourism and proposing an alternative tourism future for the sector (see also Jafari, 2001). Subsequent to this, however, has been the realization that ecotourism, or indeed any form of tourism, must be subject to critical appraisal regarding the degree to which it actually is sustainable, or simply an opportunity for ego-enhancement masquerading under a veneer of environmental concern

(Wheeller, 1993). Scholarship focused on the sustainability potential of whale tourism is emblematic of this trend, with questions being posed regarding the degree to which whale watching is necessarily any more sustainable than whale harvesting (see Cunningham, Huijbens & Wearing, 2012; Kessler, Harcourt & Heller, 2013; Orams, 2000, 2001; Wearing, Cunningham, Schweinsberg & Jobberns, 2014). Ecotourists are recognized as being essential for the development of a sustainable whale watching industry, both on account of the need to self-regulate their own behaviour whilst around the whales but also for the benefits they can bring to host regions and societies (Cunningham et al., 2012).

If we return momentarily to the afore-mentioned IES (1995/2020) definition of ecotourism – ‘responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of local people, and involves education and interpretation’ – we are left with a number of questions related to ecotourist consumers. What does it mean for an ecotourist to act responsibly? What should be the relationship between an ecotourist and the environment (in all of its facets)? And in what way should ecotourists relate to the educational messages provided by ecotourism operators and public sector agencies? In their own way, it is these questions that lie at the heart of previous scholarly attempts to develop typologies to rationalize ecotourist motivations and desired experiences. As Fennell (2015) observed in the fourth edition of his often cited work *Ecotourism*, there has been psychographic scholarship aiming to understand the ‘values, lifestyles and [the] various interests of [ecotourists as a] ... specific segment of society’ (see also Castellanos-Verdugo, Vega-Vázquez, Oviedo-García & Orgaz-Agüera, 2016). There has also been work to understand the level of experience specialization that ecotourists demand, the rationale being that more committed or ‘soft’ or ‘hard’ ecotourists will make varying demands on destination managers and the industry to fulfil (Fennell, 2015). Weaver (2011) similarly talked in terms of

ecotourists being an emerging market that developed in response to the environmental movement and a growth in societal perspectives around green paradigms, the effect of which was to draw attention to the presence of a spectrum of ecotourists, the more active of whom have connections to other alternative tourist forms, including volunteer tourism (see also Tomazos & Butler, 2009).

Whilst ecotourist typology scholarship is valuable, work to understand the motivations of ecotourists must always be seen in the context of the distinctiveness of the activities and the congruence that exists to accepted theoretical understanding (Page & Dowling, 2001). For example, if we are to understand the motivations of ecotourists in China, we must acknowledge not only the large number of nature reserves in the country and the provision of infrastructure to encourage ecotourism development, but also the different ways that the Chinese conceive the relationship between human beings and nature. As Wen and Ximing (2008: 567) note, 'Westerners tended to claim man and nature are separate, whereas ancient Chinese traditionally conceived of them within a unity'. In recent years, there has been evidence of scholars publishing ecotourism studies on an increasingly diverse set of geographical locations including Tanzania, Fiji, Mexico, Norway, Rwanda, Sri Lanka, South Korea, and Belize (Choi, Oh & Chon, 2021; Gundersen, Vistad, Panzacchi, Strand & van Moorter, 2019; Kwan, Eagles & Gebhardt, 2010; Lemelin & Jaramillo-López, 2019; Mach & Vahradian, 2019; Mafi, Pratt & Trupp, 2019; Newsome, 2013; Olearnik & Barwicka, 2019; Sabuhoro, Wright, Munanura, Nyakabwa & Nibigira, 2017). Such work is welcome in the sense that it acknowledges the sector's inherent heterogeneity, whilst also demonstrating a willingness of the academic community to shake off the blinders of ecotourism's historically western focus. At the same time, however, Wight (2001) argues that it is difficult to definitively state what the ecotourist is

(and is not) on account of the tendency for studies to focus on markets in particular destinations and avoid wider questions around the values, predispositions, and behaviours of global ecotourism cohorts (for an exception, see Nowaczek & Smale, 2010). The complexity of the tourism experience as it relates to ecotourism was demonstrated by Wheeler (2004: 474) who argued that:

Definitions of 'new' tourism are equally fallible. Just who actually is an ecotourist? Take, for example, a visit to a waterfall. If I go to Kaieteur or Iguazu, I'm an eco-traveller exploring South America. But what if I go to play the tables at Niagara and glance at the Falls on my way to the surrounding casinos: am I an ecotourist then? Does it actually depend on my purpose of visit, or on the predilections of those 'compiling' the figures? And what, then, if my main purpose of visiting South America is as a sex tourist, and the falls are little more than a diversion? Am I still an eco-tourist?

The importance of considering the relationship between theoretical constructs and place-based circumstance was recently demonstrated by Dodds (2019), who argued that experiences develop across a traveller's lifetime. With reference to Butler's destination life cycle model (see Butler, 1980), Dodds (2019: 218) argued that as tourists mature the

less touristy they will act and the more they will seek out "other" types of experiences or act less like a traditional tourist and more like a local. They also may feel more responsibility toward the destination as they are more familiar and therefore treat it more like their home.

An evolving ecotourist for an evolving time

As the world continues to be impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, it is perhaps never more important that those responsible for the management of ecotourism destinations consider what it

means to be a responsible eco-traveller. Ecotourism attractions like the Gibbon in Cambodia (Esguerra, 2020) are at threat of infection from COVID-19. Conservation programmes to protect mountain gorillas that were previously supported by revenue from ecotourism operations are now under pressure from declining international tourist revenue (Losh, 2020). A survey of 312 African safari tour operators in September 2020 found that 92% (287) of operators had experienced a decrease of over 75% in actual bookings due to the pandemic (Beekwilder, 2020). This was said to be directly impacting the 16 million people employed directly and indirectly in Africa's tourism industry (Equilibrium Research, 2020). The International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) has also reported on data drawn from protected area managers in 19 countries, which indicated that protected area agencies had been 'significantly affected their ability to perform basic functions, including payment of salaries and protecting endangered species, monitoring illegal wildlife trade and protecting local communities from damages caused by wildlife' (Waithaka, 2020). At the same time, however, ecotourism is held up as being a major part of global tourism's eventual recovery from COVID-19 (e.g. Cardona, 2020). With its historical focus on environmental protection, local economic development and the provision of more personalized recreational opportunities for travellers, ecotourism is connected to the notion of a 'new normal' post COVID-19 (see also Ateljevic, 2020; Brouder et al., 2020; UNWTO, 2020b).

Romagosa (2020) has argued that ecotourism operators, many of whom are small and medium enterprises, are well placed to be part of a sustainable pandemic recovery in that they combine low visitor numbers with high-quality experiences and a destination value-add. To be successful in this regard, however, will require a critical evaluation of how consumer interests have evolved as a result of the pandemic. Fennell (2020) has explored opportunities for the ecotourism sector

to develop capabilities in the provision of personalized, interactive real time tours that can be completed remotely by a traveller away from the real attraction in the destination region (e.g. vEcotourism.org and Wildeverse). Whilst some would question whether virtual reality can ever be anything more than a tool for offering opportunities to augment existing ecotourism experiences, the real question for managers will be whether virtual reality can offset funds that have been lost due to the absence of in-person travellers (Refisch, 2020). This immediately raises the question of how price as an independent variable is factored into the framing of a tourist experience. At the time of writing, studies on the effects of COVID-19 on ecotourist's willingness to pay (WTP) have been absent from mainstream tourism journals; WTP has been considered in the context of broader travel intentions (see Sánchez-Cañizares, Cabeza-Ramírez, Muñoz-Fernández & Fuentes-García, 2020). Rivera and Croes (2010) have previously argued that price is an antecedent of quality in the framing of tourist experiences. Questions for researchers will be whether future ecotourists will adjust their expectations of what they are willing to pay for an experience based on either their experiences with lockdown or other social distancing protocols, or whether the existence of COVID-19 has fundamentally changed travellers' expectations of the appropriateness of travel outside of their immediate community or region?

More broadly, however, we would suggest that the tourism industry needs to consider whether ecotourists have unrealistic expectations over what their experience should encompass.

Historically, West and Carrier talked in terms of ecotourists crossing the 'line from "culture" into "nature" in pursuit of a romanticised wilderness space' (West & Carrier, 2004, cited in Fletcher, 2014: 151). Higgins-Desbiolles (2020) has argued that if we are to pursue social and ecological justice goals for tourism post COVID-19, we must think carefully as to whether a reset focused

on developing a more environmentally responsible sector is enough? Or instead, do we need to reject established historical myths on what ecotourism is and is not and ‘redefine and reorient tourism based on the rights and interests of local communities and local peoples’ (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020: 610). In doing so, we must learn from the past but also embrace the reality that a tourism destination is a heterogeneous place based construct subject to often competing histories and contemporary priorities between different stakeholder groups (Buckley, 2020; Schweinsberg, Wearing & Darcy, 2012; Schweinsberg, Wearing & Lai, 2020). The central paradox of ecotourism remains how best to merge consumptive nature and how best to reconcile these to equally important conservation outcomes. Drawing on data collected prior to COVID-19, Beall et al. (2020) recently suggested that travellers will choose ecotourist experiences on the basis of both environmental values and ego-enhancement criteria. But, is this acceptable in the new normal? Or do we have to tighten our framing of sustainable ecotourism and only pursue ecotourist experiences that comport to an understanding that the needs of an ecotourist must be secondary to concerns of local people?

Conclusion

Buckley et al. (2019) recently argued that the ‘economic value of protected areas from the improved mental health of visitors ... using quality-adjusted life years, a standard measure in health economics, is US\$6 trillion per annum’. This staggering sum indicates the importance of the global ecotourism industry, not only to economies and societies in destination regions (e.g. Hakim, Subanti & Tambunan, 2011) but also to societies in tourism generating regions. Within the United States alone, the US National Parks Service (NPS) manages 417 areas covering around 34 million hectares and, in 2017, over 300 million visitors travelled to NPS managed

sites and spending approximately US\$18.2 billion in local gateway regions (Cullinane Thomas, 201). This spending sustained 306,000 jobs, and contributed US\$11.9 billion in employment income, US\$20.3 billion in value-add (contribution to gross domestic product), and US\$35.8 billion in economic output (Cullinane Thomas, Koontz & Cornachione, 2018). This chapter has been entitled *Ecotourism: Myth or Reality* to draw attention to the fact that in spite of all its economic value, there is still substantial debate in scholarly communities regarding who an ecotourist actually is. Previous studies typically account for consumer variability by presenting newer tourist typologies. However, with the ever-increasing volume of largely case study-based ecotourism scholarship (see Weaver & Lawton, 2007), it is difficult for any theoretical framing to account for all variability in the data. In this chapter, we have deviated from many previous discussions and instead sought to argue that how a society frames the ‘ecotourist’ will evolve temporally in a manner that reflects evolving societal understanding of sustainability. There is, we have argued, no definition of ‘ecotourist’ that will ultimately stand the test of time; there is no permanent reality. There are, however, myths that both inspire travellers at the time to partake in similar activities, whilst also providing future travellers with a reference point to allow them to feel part of group of ecotourists, adventurers, that is bigger than themselves.

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