

Ecotourism and Community Development: Creating Shared Value for Local Communities

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Introduction

Environmental tourism is an evolving method of travel that allows individuals to experience nature while promoting conservation and maintaining sustainable tourism. Ecotourism promotes responsible behavior to reduce the harmful impact of travel on the surrounding environment and people who live and work in that region. Sustainable ecotourism practices will not only aid in preventing the destruction of the natural environment but also will protect the diversity of plants and animals, as well as enhance the quality of life for residents. Individuals travelling through ecotourism support conservation efforts by having the opportunity to appreciate nature's beauty; thus allowing traveling persons and the natural environment to be interdependent.

In addition to providing an opportunity for individual travellers to support conservation efforts, ecotourism is a viable tool for communities to gain economically and socially from tourism-based activities. When communities are

partners and participants in ecotourism, they are provided an opportunity to enhance their quality of life and be involved in decision-making. A shared-value ethic ensures that those receiving the benefits of ecotourism activities are the same persons who support those activities, thereby creating sustainable development and growth. In order for ecotourism destinations to be successful, local communities must share in the profits, be actively involved in their respective ecotourism activities, and have a sense of ownership for their unique natural and cultural resources. (Munandar et al., 2022).

By providing historical context for ecotourism, one can gain perspective on how the principles of ecotourism have developed, and how those principles have affected modern ecotourism practices. By examining the historical roots and development of ecotourism, understanding can be gained about how ecotourism relates today in terms of community development and environmental sustainability (Munandar et al., 2022).

Historical Influences of Ecotourism

Ecotourism has developed as a result of a growing concern for the environmental impacts of mass tourism, as well as the increasing difficulty in using natural resources successfully. The worldwide plight for conservation and sustainability coincides with the emergence of some major ecological movements advocating for conservation of natural resources and biodiversity. These movements inspired many well-known organizations to promote travel conducted respectfully of local communities and ecosystems, as well as promote positive contributions from tourists to the local host community.

The ecotourism historical context is shaped largely by a burgeoning global awareness of how ecological health relates to the well-being of local communities. The worldwide trends of the time clearly demanded sustainable alternatives to traditional tourism; the majority of traditional tourism practices resulted in the exploitation of local communities or damage to the environment. Ecotourism attempted to alter this situation by offering travelers the chance to support conservation efforts while fostering economic development within the local community (Smith, 2018).

As ecotourism developed, the benefits of ecotourism extended far beyond the realm of environmental protection. Through responsible tourism, ecotourism

provided financial support to local communities and consequently stimulated job opportunities and cultural exchange. The connection developed between ecotourism and the development of the local community has been increasingly vital to the local residents; people living within the local community are much more likely to support conservation of the environment when there are economic benefits directly tied to those efforts. Understanding this connection to local community development is essential in assessing the economic benefits of ecotourism to local residents, which is further discussed in the next section (Smith, 2018).

Furthermore, like modern environmental movements working with different indigenous frameworks in several locations, ecotourism initiatives must operate within the confines of complex societies and traditional cultures in the areas located. According to Smith (2018) recognizing local cultural practices and voices is vital for ecotourism to succeed. This helps guarantee that all stakeholders have an opportunity to participate within the outdoor recreation environment, while simultaneously allowing for alterations to occur through use of Indigenous perspectives.

The Economic Benefits to Local Communities

Ecotourism provides an economic benefit to local communities and leads to improved livelihoods. The creation of jobs is one of the most immediate impacts associated with ecotourism; this often translates into increased employment opportunities in different sectors (e.g. accommodation, guiding and retail). Local businesses may be able to grow as a result of meeting the needs of visitors; for example, providing a place to sleep, eat, or learn about the local way of life. In addition to generating revenue for businesses, local residents may find a job where none existed previously due to the expansion created through tourism. (Giddy and Rogerson, 2000).

In addition to directly generating income through initial sale transactions, visitors to local businesses will allow economic activity to continue re-circulating through the local economy through what's referred to as a "multiplier effect." Economic resilience will be created through reinvestment back into the local economy by businesses where they will generate new profits from the money spent by visiting customers. For instance, local artists will increase their production of handmade products, thus providing these artists with sustainable livelihood opportunities by

providing the means to continue their craftsmanship; i.e., artists will continue to produce traditional crafts.

It is important to note that economic growth must be integrated with efforts that promote cultural heritage; as economically disadvantaged local residents become more financially secure due to increases in income from ecotourism, they will continue to maintain and promote their cultural identity. the rewards of their traditions, and are subsequently more willing to share those traditions and all they represent with the world. There must be a way of ensuring the economic viability of local communities as well as a commitment on the part of the local populace to preserve their culture. Both of these factors demonstrate that an equitable ecotourism model must be created to both support economic development and to create an identity for the local community.

Ecotourism has the potential to provide benefits for local communities, but various barriers prevent small to medium local enterprises from participating fully in tourism supply chains. Such barriers include a lack of access to financing and other logistical challenges that prevent SMMEs from taking advantage of the many opportunities created by tourism, particularly in areas such as the Addo Elephant Park near Port Elizabeth.

Cultural preservation and the empowerment of local communities are essential to ensuring the long-term success of ecotourism. By utilizing ecotourism to commercialize their culture, communities are able to demonstrate to themselves and to the world their cultural heritage (i.e., arts, language, stories) and thereby uplift themselves with new found pride. Participation in activities associated with tourism allows local people to connect with visitors through their stories and, ultimately, convert their history into a source of income and pride for the community.

The involvement of local communities is critical to this process. When local people are involved in developing and managing tourism projects, they can work to protect and accurately represent their culture to the tourism community. In this way, involvement of local people will provide for the economic empowerment of the local community, as well as, continue to strengthen the perception of locals as part of the global tourism family. advocates for their needs and wants, and in turn encourages them to take an active role in developing sustainable behaviors that not only benefit into developing sustainable behaviours that benefit both the tourist, as well as the local community. In addition, through ecotourism, there is

an opportunity to preserve culture, as well as to protect and promote knowledge about the way of life within that culture, which ultimately leads to the creation of an environment based on reciprocity between visitors and hosts. Visitors who visit these communities develop a sense of appreciation for the local culture they have visited, and subsequently return home to become ambassadors for that culture, thereby helping to develop an awareness and appreciation for the culture of the destination they visited. As communities develop economically, they will be more likely to have long-term commitments to the preservation of their cultural heritage, and will continue to promote the preservation of the rich and diverse cultural tapestry within their communities for generations to come.

The preservation of culture, through ecotourism, also corresponds well to the broader goals of conserving a community's natural resources. When the community perceives that it is part of both the cultural and ecological community, they will be more likely to exhibit behaviors that are sustainable from both an ecological and cultural perspective, which will contribute to the preservation of the cultural heritage of their community, and the ecological systems upon which they depend. This dual commitment to the custodianship of culture and the environment creates the foundation for a holistic approach to community development through ecotourism.

Communities are rapidly developing a new perspective on the need for conserving the environment. Many communities are beginning to see the need to not only conserve biodiversity, but to also sustainably manage their natural resources. In those locations where ecotourism has been successful, the local community has been at the forefront of the conservation, while implementing numerous conservation initiatives, and thus providing an economic stimulus to the local economy at the same time. Throughout the world, community-based conservation is the most effective way to expand local communities through the development of the natural resources surrounding the community. Through practicing sustainable management, these communities will be able to help keep their ecosystems healthy and resilient.

Communities engage in sustainable management through educational programs that raise awareness of the importance of biodiversity, as well as the dangers of losing habitats and climate change. As local people learn how to balance their needs with the needs of the environment, they will develop stronger connections to their environment. This type of education will help people understand how

ecological systems work and instills a strong sense of stewardship for their natural resources.

Despite the above-mentioned advantages of promoting environmental conservation, challenges still exist. In attempting to protect their ecosystems, some communities experience developmental pressure from urbanization, agricultural expansion and other outside forces. The discussions surrounding ecotourism must take these pressures into account, since the ecotourism industry can create competition between land use and conservation. To ensure that conservation dollars and community growth goals align, it will be essential to find effective Land use plans; this is especially true since the recognition/accountability of the ecological roles of different ecosystems will be critical (Portillo-Quintero et al., 2017).

Challenges and Critiques of Ecotourism

There are many challenges and criticisms associated with ecotourism that should be taken into consideration, especially while communities attempt to gain access to the benefits of ecotourism. A major concern is over-commercialization. The goal of ecotourism was to establish and promote sustainable practices however, with an increase in tourist demand, the result could be the commercialization of the culture, environment and local traditions/craft of the culture (the product); thus taking away from their original value and converting them into superficial experiences for tourism. Without an authentic connection between the visitor and the local culture; local cultural practices can easily become products for sale, rather than as a true reflection of the culture's heritage.

Another negative consequence of ecotourism is the creation of unintended negative environmental consequences (e.g., the introduction of pollutants, habitat degradation, and waste creation) as a result of the increased number of visitors to ecologically sensitive areas; thus negating many of the conservation efforts that the ecotourism industry relies on. Even with the best intentions in creating ecotourism, there are many times that the initiatives implemented do not correspond with proven historical behaviour or science, making it difficult for the initiative to balance Visitor demand with the best environmental practices.

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