

Conference Strand: Global Resources and Perspectives

Ecotourism in Latin America as a Means of Working for Sustainability?
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ABSTRACT

While not a panacea, ecotourism has great potential for both economic development--especially in remote areas where few other possibilities exist--and for conservation of the natural environment and human cultures if it is properly planned, developed, and managed, such as including interpretation as an essential element. This presentation shares stories of organizing and conducting 17 University of Vermont (UVM) travel-study courses to 5 Latin America countries emphasizing interpretation as a key element of ecotourism initiatives and community-based approaches to protecting biodiversity. The students determine whether such approaches are effective means for working toward sustainability in the countries involved.

When we reflect on technology transfer and diffusion of innovation, we usually think of developed, industrialized countries in the Global North sharing their medical and scientific and manufacturing discoveries and innovations with developing countries in the Global South or Third World. However, in the case of ecotourism, I believe the opposite is true: some of the most exciting, creative, and successful experimentation with ecotourism has taken place in developing countries, especially in many of the Latin American countries where I have led travel-study courses for my students. We in North America have much to learn and draw from their success stories.

KEYWORDS

ecotourism, sustainability, environmental interpretation, community-based conservation,

protection of biodiversity, international/foreign/global travel-study courses, Latin America, Belize, Ecuador, Costa Rica, Honduras, Brazil

INTRODUCTION: UNDERSTANDING SUSTAINABILITY VIA ECOTOURISM AND INTERPRETATION

The World Commission on Environment and Development (Brundtland Commission) in Our Common Future (1987) offered a definition of sustainability “...to meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” Sustainability is fundamentally and inevitably a vague concept, but at UVM I have tried to operationalize it and make it more concrete and make it come alive by teaching students about sustainability first-hand via 17 travel-study courses since 1999 to Latin America. The 3-credit courses have been offered to Brazil or Honduras during January break, to Belize over extended spring break, and to Ecuador (Galapagos Islands, Amazon rainforest, Andean highlands) and Costa Rica during summer session. Participants in these travel-study courses include Environmental Studies and Natural Resources upperclass students and graduate students as well as students planning to be lawyers, doctors, businesspeople. etc.

All of these travel-study courses address sustainability, ecotourism, and environmental interpretation. Interpretation is viewed as a key element of ecotourism, which is viewed as one means of attempting to achieve sustainability. And while they all provide students with first-hand knowledge about tropical forest ecosystems (as well as coral reef ecosystems, in the case of Belize and Ecuador), what distinguishes these courses most from other university travel-study courses to Latin America exploring tropical forest ecology or anthropology or even ecotourism is their emphasis on

community-based sustainable development/conservation/ protection of biodiversity/ ecotourism--a sharp contrast with the North American tradition of practicing conservation by setting aside tracts of land as parks or other protected areas. Members of the community cooperate in protecting the biodiversity of their natural communities and offer ecotourism efforts from which they benefit financially far more than if they cut down the forests and engaged in excessive slash-and-burn agriculture or ranching, killed the wildlife, etc.

PREPARATION FOR THE TRAVEL-STUDY EXPERIENCE

For these travel-study courses to venues in Latin America, our starting point is one of humility, recognizing that we have more to learn from them than they from us when it comes to living sustainably. Through readings, lectures, discussions, and videotapes, participating students—while in Vermont, prior to the travel portion of their course—gain an understanding of:

- sustainability/sustainable development, with emphasis on community-based approaches;
- ecotourism, and the importance of including interpretation as an essential element in its proper design and implementation;
- environmental interpretation and its role in sustainability and ecotourism;
- the natural history and ecology and the cultural heritage of the country they visit;
- non-governmental organizations engaged in environmental conservation and protection of biodiversity in that country; and
- community-based conservation.

ECOTOURISM

Honey (1999, p. 25) contends that “ecotourism is travel to fragile, pristine, and

usually protected areas that strives to be low impact and (usually) small scale. It helps educate the traveler; provides funds for conservation; directly benefits the economic development and political empowerment of local communities; and fosters respect for different cultures and for human rights.” Ecotourism is “more than travel to enjoy or appreciate nature” (Honey 1999, p. 6) “striving to respect and benefit protected areas as well as the people living around or on these lands.” (Honey 1999, p. 3). One of the key characteristics, then, of genuine or authentic ecotourism, is building environmental awareness by offering visitors educational first-hand experiences; hence, the importance of interpretation.

Since the 1990s, tourism has “vied with oil as the world’s largest legitimate business” (Honey 1999, p. 9). “Tourism is the world’s number one employer, accounting for 10 per cent of jobs globally.” (Honey 1999, p. 9) “Worldwide, tourism generates annual revenues of nearly 3 trillion dollars and contributes nearly 11% of the global GNP (Gross National Product), making it the world's largest industry. Ecotourism has become the most rapidly growing and most dynamic sector of the tourism market,” (Honey 1999, p. 390) and, prior to September 11, 2001, ecotourism grew by 30 per cent annual increase, compared to a 4 percent growth rate in the U.S. travel industry. Several factors (Lindsay 2003) indicate that it is likely to thrive over time.

Ecotourism has special potential as a tool for both economic development (a foreign exchange earner potentially less destructive than alternatives such as logging, oil extraction, cattle, bananas, commercial fishing, or conventional mass tourism) and environmental protection in developing countries. However, conventional mass tourism--which has become synonymous with the four S’s: sun, sea, sand, and sex--has high infrastructure costs, adverse social and environmental effects, meager economic benefits

(because of leakage, whereby most of the profits do not stay in the host countries) (Honey 1999, p. 4) overdevelopment and uneven development, and “invasion by culturally insensitive and economically disruptive foreigners.” (Honey 1999, p. 9) Ecotravel offers an alternative to many of these negative effects by helping conserve fragile ecosystems, support endangered species and habitats, preserve indigenous cultures, and develop sustainable local economies. “By looking at the alternatives and making informed travel choices, (following visitors tips on being good ecotourists and guiding principles for ecotourism (Wight 1993), ecotourists) can minimize (their) impact and positively contribute to the conservation of natural environments, local economies and cultures” (<http://www.ecotourism.org/>).

While the majority of the literature is dominated by proponents of ecotourism, there are also critics and detractors. Perhaps the biggest criticism is that ecotourism plays a role in destroying the culture and lifestyles of indigenous peoples which it claims it is seeking to protect (McLaren 2003); hence, the importance of developing codes of conduct and setting standards for the interaction between the tourism industry and local communities, particularly indigenous peoples.

Honey claims that “the ultimate goal of ecotourism should be to infuse the entire travel industry with the (multiple) principles and practices of ecotourism and thereby (significantly and fundamentally--not superficially--) transform tourism into an environmentally and culturally sensitive activity that contributes to sustainable growth in developing countries.” (Honey 1999, p. 53) Yet, with few exceptions, she believes “it has not succeeded in moving beyond a narrow niche market to a set of principles and practices that infuses the entire tourism industry. Although the large corporate players have endorsed ecotourism, in practice they have mainly undertaken modest, cost-saving

reforms that they aggressively market as major ecotourism innovations.” (Honey 1999, p. 394) Honey contends that “much of what is marketed as ecotourism amounts to only ecotourism light, which offers tidbits of nature (such as offering a brief walk in the rain forest) or minor environmental reforms (such as not changing sheets every day or using recycled paper for menus or stationery or putting biodegradable soap in guest bedrooms or installing energy-saving showerheads) or, worse, ‘greenwashing’ scams that use environmentally friendly images but follow none of the principles and practices of sound ecotourism.” (Honey 1999, p. 390).

ON-SITE

On-site, while in Latin America, students visit, eat at, and stay in a wide range of ecotourist lodges and have extensive field trips, guided activities, and guest speakers, for all of which they develop ecotourism and environmental interpretation “scorecards” (critiques/assessments). Also, students make numerous entries in their journals, reflecting on what they see and do and relating the activities to readings and prior experiences via articulated learning statements.

In addition, students write conventional research papers on such topics as: the Quichua indigenous people in the Oriente in Ecuador, management problems from feral animals on the Galapagos Islands, Belize’s coral reefs, volcanoes in Costa Rica, Mayan agricultural practices, manatees, mangrove swamps, jaguars, etc., or they develop interpretive media which actually get used immediately in the host country (e.g., self-guiding trail and brochure on medicinal/healing herbs at La Milpa Field Station of the Program for Belize and at Coopeunioro on the Osa Peninsula in Costa Rica). In fact, the Honduran experiences were service-learning courses in which all the students partnered with the NGO Aldea Global and CEASO, the Center for Teaching and Learning in El

Socorro, to develop interpretive media for the Center and for a visitor center along the shore of Lake Yojoa (e.g., exhibits on sustainable agriculture practices at the Center, how coffee is grown and processed, ecology of the cloud forest in Cerro Azul Meambar National Park, ecology and history of Lake Yojoa, etc.). Also, these travel-study experiences have subsequently led to several Environmental Studies senior theses and Natural Resources Master's theses.

CONCLUSION: THE PROMISE OF ECOTOURISM

Ecotourism offers an opportunity for communities and individuals that possess interesting natural and cultural resources “to develop sustainable economic strategies, instead of pursuing environmentally-damaging patterns of resource use. However, finding a compromise between preservation and development is often challenging, and ecotourism can generate additional environmental problems for the very regions it is intended to protect (thereby “killing the goose that laid the golden egg”)... Ecotourism can live up to its promise if it follows the principles of wise development, adequately monitors and protects its resources, and ensures fair distribution of profits within the host community” (Lindsay 2003) and avoids the pitfalls of unsustainable or unregulated tourism that damages the resources we all value. So, while it is not a panacea or silver bullet, it does offer great promise. And we in North America have much to learn and draw from success stories of ecotourism--especially those that incorporate interpretation as a key element--in many of the Latin American countries where I have led travel-study courses for my students.

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