Sustainable Tourism and Eco-Tourism

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1. Sustainable Tourism

Tourism depends for its very existence on quality natural environments; it is equally dependent on human environments, resources and cultures.

For a long time tourism was seen as a ‘soft’ activity, different from other forms of development, inherently conservatory given that its sustainability relied on the preservation of the natural resource base and the local cultures. However it is now recognised that tourism is an industry just like any other, an industry which has been characterised by rapid, short-term ventures which have often damaged those very assets upon which they depend. "Tourism kills tourism" is acknowledged as a widespread phenomena. Tourism is essentially an exploitative industry, and as such it is justified to regulate tourism as is done for any other polluting industry. Obvious is the need for the tourism industry to become sustainable.

"Sustainable tourism" is often equated with nature or eco-tourism; but sustainable tourism development means more than protecting the natural environment - it means proper consideration of host peoples, communities, cultures, customs, lifestyles, and social and economic systems. It is tourism that truly benefits those who are on the receiving end, and that does not exploit and degrade the environment in which they live and from which they must earn a living after the last tourist has flown back home. It is tourism that enhances the material life of local communities, without causing a loss of traditional employment systems, acculturation or social disruption.

Thus tourism is brought within the debate on sustainable development in general. Sustainable development (and therefore sustainable tourism) takes into account three central points:

- the necessary interactions between the environment and economic activity;
- long-term time scale; and
- inter- as well as intra-generational equity - providing for the needs of current societies without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

From my own observations in Vietnam, "Sustainable tourism" as described above is a very new idea, and of those in the tourism sector, only a few understand the term and its implications. Many continue to equate "sustainable tourism" with 'sustaining tourism growth'. Sustaining tourism growth seems a major priority of present tourism policy. There is much more to tourism than achieving target numbers of visitors, or target numbers of hotels and beds. And high targets at that. Quality versus quantity is a constantly painful decision/trade off in the tourism industry, and it usually goes to the proponents of ‘more and bigger is best’.

Implicit in the concept of sustainability as defined above and as defined by virtually every organisation involved in Sustainable Development, is the concept of limits. Limits mean controls, controls mean do's and don'ts developed from in-depth research on such things as environmental and social indicators and carrying capacities. No where is this more important than in eco-tourism.

2. Eco-Tourism

"Eco-tourism" is a relatively new idea that has dramatically captured the attention of many people from a variety of backgrounds. It seems to be a catch-all word that has different meaning to different persons. To some it means ecologically-sound tourism; to others it is synonymous with nature tourism, alternative, appropriate, responsible, ethical, green, environmentally friendly or sustainable tourism. Despite the continued debate about exactly what eco-tourism entails, it seems that most agree that Eco-tourism must be a force for sustaining natural resources. Eco-tourism is nature travel that advances conservation and sustainable development efforts.
Eco-tourism is in its infancy in Vietnam, yet it has certainly become a buzz word in a short period of time. Everyone appears to be talking about it - and the media are latching onto the term wholeheartedly. My preliminary observation is that there is a general lack of understanding, in both the local media and tourism industry, of what constitutes an eco-tourism experience, what an eco-tourism venture/initiative entails, and what the underlying rationale for eco-tourism is.

Eco-tourism is a specialised, niche market that has evolved with the diversification of the tourism industry into ‘alternative’ or ‘special interest’ forms of tourism, including nature and adventure tourism.

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Model 2: Eco-tourism Components Model: overlap of eco-tourism with other tourism types.

I realise that the term is subject to considerable debate in international fora, but of the eco-tourism experiences being lauded in the Vietnamese media, the majority appear to fit more in the realm of ‘nature’ or ‘countryside’ tours or ‘cultural’ tours. The term eco-tourism is being used lightly, and interchangeably with nature tourism. In doing so there is a failure to acknowledge that eco-tourism is a subset of nature tourism which falls at the ‘purest’ end of the broad spectrum of nature tourism experiences.

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Figure 1 depicts this succinctly: Diversity exists in nature based tourism, with some travel of a general and un-discerning consumptive character, and other travel of a more conservation conscious, learning oriented, informed and hence responsible character.

2.1 Tour operators and eco tourism

At the moment eco-(tourism) tours in Vietnam are being promoted largely by the ‘mass market’ tour companies who, I would argue, almost certainly do not have an idea of the ethics and underlying codes of conduct and behaviours (environmental, social, cultural and other) that are key components of eco-tourism activities. (Even natural area managers and environmental/developmental organisations keen to find solutions to problems through eco-tourism may have insufficient understanding of some of these issues and the potential implications for management that adopting eco-tourism can entail).

Around the world there are many cases where socio-cultural and environmental concerns are promoted by tour operators simply as a gimmick to increase profits and attract a clean image. For example eco-tourism in Central America has been described by critics as having "gone awry": entrepreneurs have used eco-tourism as a convenient marketing tool for what is actually traditional mass tourism ventures. And the problems remain: foreign exchange leakage, foreign ownership and environmental degradation. Old-style tourism has merely reappeared in a new green disguise.

A distinction must therefore be drawn between traditional tour operators and principled eco-tourism operators: the former frequently show no commitment to conservation or natural area management, merely offering clients an opportunity to experience exotic places and people before they change or disappear; principled eco-tourism operators, on the other hand, have begun to form partnerships with protected area managers and local people, with the intention of contributing to the long-term protection of wildlands and local development, and in the hope of improving mutual understanding between residents and visitors.

A quote (OVERHEAD)

You don’t become an ecotourist operator by just having nature as your destination…what do you do with waste? What do you do with hazardous chemicals? How do you transport? Do you buy locally?…Are you encouraging wildlife? What are you doing with your sewage? It is these kind of nitty gritty things that will make the difference between eco-tourism being a force for the environment or simply being another threat.


What is needed for the global eco-tourism industry is a system for accreditation of tour operators; the development of codes of conduct and codes of ethics for the industry and tourists alike; rigorous assessment
criteria, and a tightly controlled and monitored industry.

Various lists of ‘green criteria’ have been proposed to assess operators and facilities, such as a ‘green logo’ assessment system. This would involve a minimum rating to qualify an operation as eco-tourism. Above this minimum a sliding scale could exist wherein operators with higher green star ratings (more stars) offer the purer eco-tourism experience. The consumer can thus be more confident that the experience chosen will meet expectations, the industry’s credibility is strengthened and the natural resource base is protected from shoddy operators.

2.2. The best definition of eco-tourism???

A quote (OVERHEAD)

Eco-tourism is distinguished from other forms of educational or nature based tourism by a high degree of environmental and ecological education, delivered in the field by qualified interpreters. Eco-tourism contains a significant portion of human wilderness interaction that, coupled with the education provided, tend to transform tourists into strong advocates for environmental protection. Eco-tourism practice minimises the environmental and cultural impacts of visitors, ensures that financial benefits flow to host communities and places a special emphasis on financial contribution to conservation efforts.


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Figure 2: Sustainable Eco-tourism Values and Principles Model

2.3. Eco-tourism management issues

It is important to note that eco-tourism CAN be, but is NOT AUTOMATICALLY, a form of sustainable tourism. To achieve sustainable eco-tourism involves balancing economic, environmental and social goals within an ethical framework of values and principles.

Eco-tourism markets are expanding faster than any other tourism market segment. Ironically this rapid expansion threatens the sustainability of eco-tourism and the extent to which it can contribute to sustainable development. Eco-tourism is inherently limited in the extent to which it can be developed and promoted, given that it cannot support large numbers without setting in train a process of succession and change which destroys the reason for its existence. Hence central to a sustainable eco-tourism industry are controls, restrictions and limits, codes of ethics and conduct. Consequently questions of equity are certain to arise.

A big difficulty for Vietnam and other countries wishing to embrace eco-tourism is the idea that in order to achieve a sustainable eco-tourism industry planners/managers/policy makers must impose limits. How difficult is it to impose restrictions on the number of visitors to an area…when there is the lure of expansion, as people queue up at the gate?! And in a country with a huge domestic population…the concept of limiting numbers appears almost ludicrous and is certainly controversial. It is natural that there will be concerns about equity and elitism, especially if fees or charges are used as a means to limit numbers.

The management tools of ‘limits of acceptable change’ and carrying capacity are very important, however their application is far from easy, being limited by the extensive gaps in knowledge of ecological systems, and the lack of universally accepted indicators of carrying capacity.

To compound the problems inherent in establishing carrying capacities is the lack of understanding and awareness of the concept as applied to tourism. Carrying capacity has four branches: physical, biological, psychological, social. All are related to the number of visitors/tourists to a site or area.
• Physical is the actual number of visitors a site can hold;
• Biological is the point at which environmental degradation occurs to the extent that it is irreversible or unacceptable;
• Psychological is the point at which the tourists feels the quality of their experience is damaged by the number of other tourists and/or their behaviours, and
• Social is the level at which the local inhabitants of the site (possibly the tourist attraction themselves) feel disrupted, intruded upon etc.

Thus carrying capacities include qualitative as well as quantitative aspects, and consequently there is no 'correct' figure for an area. There is a cultural component here that is I believe is worth highlighting as well: I as an Australian will have a different concept of psychological and social carrying capacity and even physical and biological carrying capacity from my Vietnamese or Asian colleague. At the most basic, my concept of and tolerance towards crowding is very different to that of a Vietnamese!

It is obvious there is a need to research the carrying capacities of particular sites on which to base management decisions, and the target audience/market needs to be carefully considered. Eco-tourism does not cater for all and any type of tourist.

Conclusion

Eco-tourism faces considerable challenges, not least is the challenge to keep foremost a supply-oriented management perspective. The tourism industry has traditionally catered to market demand, attempting to foster, maintain and expand the market, rather than focusing on maintaining the product or experience. Addition of facilities and infrastructure and other 'attractions' often occurs in order to keep the tourists coming, resulting in a tourist experience more and more divorced from the original attraction (Butler 1993:38).

The challenge of eco-tourism is to avoid this process and focus on maintaining the product/experience. Growth can only go so far, and not nearly as far as with other forms of tourism given the dominance of ecosystem and ecological considerations. A supply-oriented management perspective has as its primary considerations the nature and resilience of the resource, cultural or local community preferences, and interpretive and conservation programmes.

Though imposition of such measures may undermine freedom to practice, and incur considerable additional costs, eco-tourism's ethical basis requires rigorous standards. Operators will have to comply in order to remain in the distinctive industry segment, or alternatively they will be required to disassociate with the term eco-tourism, possibly reverting to nature tourism or other more generalist categories.

Capacity Building for Sustainable Tourism Initiatives Project

This two year project is being implemented by a team of two at IUCN. It commenced in mid-October 1997. It is being part funded by a number of INGOs working in Vietnam. The project has its origins in the growing concern amongst NGO’s with the visible and increasing impacts of tourism on ethnic minority groups in Sa Pa.

Goal

To identify and raise awareness of the negative socio-economic, cultural and ecological impacts of tourism, and contribute to the development of sustainable community-based models of tourism that can generate sustainable income for some of the country’s poorest and least advantaged communities, while at the same time helping to maintain Vietnam’s cultural and biological diversity.

Objectives

The major objectives of the project are:

a) Networking & Information Exchange

To identify key local, national, regional and international tourism stakeholders, as well as agencies and individuals concerned about tourism and its impacts.
To establish a network of agencies and individuals in support of the development of sustainable tourism in Vietnam.

To facilitate information exchanges between network members within and outside Vietnam.

To gather and disseminate relevant information, and identify and as far as possible fill gaps in that information.

b) Research & Analysis

To collate existing research in the field of tourism and its impacts, analyse the quality and relevance of that research, publicise its existence, identify gaps in existing research, and promote, coordinate or conduct the most urgent pieces of required additional research relating primarily to the impacts of tourism on ethnic minority communities and their environments in upland areas of Vietnam.

c) Education & Training

To identify gaps in the awareness and knowledge about sustainable tourism of key Vietnamese stakeholders, identify the most pressing training needs, and facilitate or conduct that training, whether it be of stakeholders at the national or the local level or both, with the aim of raising their awareness regarding the socio-economic, cultural, gender and ecological issues associated with tourism, and the advantages and ways of adopting a sustainable tourism approach.

To identify appropriate training courses and training organisations in-country or in the region, identify the most appropriate individuals within stakeholder groups to attend any available training, and facilitate their attendance by putting them in contact with both the training organisers and possible funders.

d) Support for a Pilot Project

To identify and select a pilot site in an upland area inhabited by ethnic minority groups as a site for research and action, building on or in support of work done in the area by a local or overseas NGO, in order to assist the local community, and in particular women members of the community, either to develop a sustainable community-based tourism initiative, or develop strategies for reducing the negative and enhancing the positive impacts of existing tourism initiatives in their area, and gain a better understanding of the local-level issues involved in implementing sustainable community-based tourism initiatives, and as a means of providing hands-on training for the different players involved.

e) Advocacy

To gain a thorough understanding of the policy environment and identify key policy-makers and policy-making processes, evolve advocacy mechanisms, and support or carry out advocacy work aimed at feeding into the development of appropriate policies and strategies at all levels within relevant government and non-state organisations and enterprises.

f) Project Extension

To prepare one or more well-documented project proposals for possible further extension of the project.

The scope of the project will be both national and site-specific, and will involve a range of diverse actors from village communities to the inter-governmental level, and including environmental groups, development organisations, academic institutions and tourism professionals. However, given the enormity of the task and the limited resources available, the project will primarily seek to act as a catalyst to stimulate discussion and action, and to mobilise resources.

For more information, please obtain a full Project Outline (available in English only).

REFERENCES


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