Sustainable Development-Based Ecotourism

by

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1.0. Introduction

It is almost impossible, with a title for a paper such as this, to avoid getting into a discussion on definitions, and debate about the merits and shortcomings of ecotourism as a tool for or component of sustainable development. There are many critics of ecotourism, who see it as a form of environmental opportunism that allows continued exploitation of natural environments by mass tourism. Mass tourism cloaked in a green name. Ecotourism is certainly a buzz word, and is becoming as ambiguous as the word ‘natural’ on the supermarket shelf.

Here is another definition of ecotourism:

“A form of tourism inspired primarily by the natural history of an area, including its indigenous cultures.

The ecotourist visits relatively undeveloped areas in the spirit of appreciation, participation and sensitivity.

The ecotourist practices a non-consumptive use of wildlife and natural resources and contributes to the visited area through labour or financial means aimed at directly benefiting the conservation of the site and the economic well-being of the local residents.

The visit should strengthen the ecotourist’s appreciation and dedication to conservation issues in general, and to the specific needs of the locale.

Ecotourism also implies a managed approach by the host country or region which commits itself to establishing and maintaining the sites with the participation of local residents, marketing them appropriately, enforcing regulations, and using the proceeds of the enterprise to fund the area’s land management as well as community development.”


This is a tough definition of ecotourism but we believe it is appropriate and necessary in order to highlight the special nature of genuine ecotourism - what ecotourism should strive to be. Further, it is important to emphasise that ecotourism does not equal nature tourism, rather it is a distinct niche/segment of the more general nature tourism sector.

Figure 1: The Nature-based Tourism - Ecotourism Spectrum

One of the reasons for continued debate on the merits of ecotourism to achieve sustainable development is that there is no blueprint for successful ecotourism development in all of its facets. Rather, there are examples of different projects in which particular components are innovative or well-implemented (Ziffer, K. 1989, Boo, E. 1990). Sites and potential projects need to be considered on a case by case basis, as many local factors - environmental, human, political, economic, social, cultural etc will work for the benefit of, or to the detriment of, an ecotourism project.

In some cases it will be very hard to ‘develop’ ecotourism. For example, in Cuc Phuong National Park mass tourism is already well established and the Park has developed facilities, hardened sites, opened up areas, to cater for these tourists. It will be very hard for ecotourism to be developed, unless the Park is able to restrict the number and movement of visitors, unless it can create specific ecotourism zones to direct ecotourists away from the present built up areas. But this may place even more environmental pressure on the Park.
Despite the lack of a blueprint, the last few years have seen a number of Codes of Sustainable Practice, Codes of Responsible Behaviour, Guidelines for Ecotourism and Sustainability etc developed for tourists, tour operators, national park managers, policy makers alike. These have been developed by environmental NGOs; NGOs dedicated to raising awareness of the negative impacts of tourism and striving to make the tourism industry more responsible and sustainable; national parks and nature reserves; and, within the tourism industry itself, international or regional tourism organisations; tour operators; outdoor equipment suppliers...

The Principles for Sustainable Tourism proposed by Tourism Concern/WWF in *Beyond the Green Horizon: a discussion paper on the Principles for Sustainable Tourism* (Figure 2) are targeted at the tourism industry (and all its stakeholders). The 10 Principles are accompanied by examples of bad and good practice around the world, and recommendations. Our Project is currently undertaking to have this translated into Vietnamese.

The Ecotourism Society has produced *Ecotourism: A Guide for Planners and Managers*. Three chapters from this informative manual have been translated and are included in the additional material provided to you today. In our visits to National Parks in Vietnam we have in all instances been asked for assistance in ‘developing ecotourism’. We acknowledge that there is a DIRE need for information and particularly practical manuals on ecotourism and sustainable tourism, and the Project would like to assist in bringing the right people to Vietnam to develop a manual on ecotourism and hold training courses for national parks managers. Such a manual would of course be useful for all in the industry.

The Project’s resource centre is open and available to anyone with a stake in or mere interest in sustainable tourism and the issues. We are starting to collect books, journals, newsletters, guidelines, manuals, case studies, academic/theoretical papers, bibliographies and publications lists, conference papers etc.

### 2.0. Carrying Capacity and Limiting Numbers

Ecotourism markets are expanding faster than any other tourism market segment. Ecotourism 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.

A big difficulty for Vietnam and other countries wishing to embrace ecotourism is the idea that in order to achieve a sustainable ecotourism 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.

Table: The Principles for Sustainable Tourism (Tourism Concern/WWF)

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principle</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Using resources sustainably: The conservation and sustainable use of resources - natural, social and cultural - is crucial and makes long-term business sense;</td>
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<td>2.</td>
<td>Reducing over-consumption and waste: Reduction of over-consumption and waste avoids the costs of restoring long-term environmental damage and contributes to the quality of tourism;</td>
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<td>3.</td>
<td>Maintaining Diversity: Maintaining and promoting natural, social and cultural diversity is essential for long-term sustainable</td>
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tourism, and creates a resilient base for the industry;

4. Integrating Tourism into Planning:
tourism development which is integrated into a national and local strategic planning framework and which undertakes environmental impacts assessments, increases the long-term viability of tourism;

5. Supporting Local Economies:
tourism that supports a wide range of local economic activities and which takes environmental costs and values into account, both protects those economies and avoids environmental damage;

6. Involving local communities:
the full involvement of local communities in the tourism sector not only benefits them and the environment in general but also improves the quality of the tourism experience;

7. Consulting Stakeholders and the Public:
consultation between the tourism industry and local communities, organisations and institutions is essential if they are to work alongside each other and resolve potential conflicts of interest;

8. Training Staff:
staff training which integrates sustainable tourism into work practices, along with recruitment of local personnel at all levels, improves the quality of the tourism product;

9. Marketing Tourism Responsibly:
marketing that provides tourists with full and responsible information increases respect for the natural, social and cultural environments of destination areas and enhances customer satisfaction;

10. Undertaking Research:
on-going research and monitoring by the industry using effective data collection and analysis is essential to help solve problems and to bring benefits to destinations, the industry and consumers.

How to decide when enough is enough, when restrictions need to be imposed? The management tools of ‘limits of acceptable change’ and carrying capacity are very important management tools to assist in achieving sustainability NOT ONLY for ecotourism or nature tourism, but for the tourism industry as a whole. However their application is far from easy and unfortunately there exists a 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 feel 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.

As carrying capacities include qualitative as well as quantitative aspects, there is consequently no ‘correct’ or empirical figure for an area. Never-the-less it is vital that an attempt is made to arrive at some estimations of the carrying capacity of each site, using the best methods and knowledge available. This research will assist in management decisions. Putting such work in the ‘too hard’ basket is counter to the principles underlying sustainable development.

The target audience/market needs to be carefully considered in establishing carrying capacity. Ecotourism does not cater for all and any type of tourist, just as a beach-side resort holiday does not appeal to all.

There is a cultural component relating to carrying capacity that may be obvious but is important to highlight: An Australian will have a different concept of psychological and social carrying capacity and even physical and biological carrying capacity from their Vietnamese or Asian colleague. At the most basic, the perception of and tolerance towards crowding will be very different.

3.0. The Target Market(s) and Managing for the Target Market(s)

The above leads to some questions:

- WHO, WHAT TYPE of tourist does Vietnam want to cater for?
  - high, middle or low income;
  - short stay visitors, long stay visitors, high spenders, low spenders;
  - those seeking relaxing beach resort holidays away from it all;
  - those seeking physical challenge and close encounters with locals in remote areas, eg: trekkers;
  - those interested purely in cultural and artistic features of Vietnam who also like to travel and stay in comfort;
  - those who travel in tours on the major routes, or those who travel independently;
  - those who want to travel to natural, undisturbed areas and learn about the environment;
  - those who stay in small hotels and guest houses, those who prefer large;
  - visitors from the region ie: ASEAN, China, Japan, Korea, or Europeans or Australasians;
  - domestic tourists...

- Can Vietnam target and successfully cater to all these categories?
- Does Vietnam, in developing ecotourism, want to provide ‘add on attractions’ for tourists already coming to Vietnam or does it want to try to attract a new market?
What are the implications for achieving genuine ecotourism when the domestic tourist often acts as though the environment is a resource to be ‘exploited and developed’ - exemplified in the consumption of wildlife for food and medicine?

Is the Vietnam domestic tourist compatible with the international visitor to natural areas or the international ecotourist?

Is there a difference between Asian tourists and Western tourists?

If Vietnam wishes to bring the international ecotourist to visit its protected areas, then this decision will have considerable implications for how it handles the domestic tourist and manages those areas.

It is important to match the numbers and types of ecotourists/nature tourists with the characteristics of the destination. This requires the monitoring of nature/ecotourists. Understanding customer groups, their motivations and characteristics, is essential for promotion, marketing, planning for improvement of facilities and services including information needs, controlling impacts via restrictions on numbers or zoning of protected areas for different types of use and different types of visitors (Cater, E. 1997; Boo, E. 1990; Ziffer, K. 1989).

The Recreational Opportunity Spectrum (ROS) developed by Clark and Stankey is a useful management tool to assist here. The ROS is an integrating framework for resource management, its underlying rationale being the assumption that providing a diverse range of recreational opportunities will best assure quality recreational experiences as it will provide for the many tastes and preferences that motivate people to participate in recreation. Division of the resource into zones with certain biological, social and managerial characteristics helps establish objectives and guidelines for their management, regulations and limits on activities, and enables assessment of optimum and maximum carrying capacity conditions and the level of change tolerated (Koeman 1989:26) (Figure 3).

Inadequate data collection on the market can lead to decision makers developing an area in such a way that they lose their market.

Numerous studies of visitors to national parks around the world have shown that nature tourists are generally more accepting of conditions different from home than are other types of tourists, that they do not demand international glamour, but are satisfied with or want to use local goods and materials and eat local foods....and that they are more demanding in seeking information about their destination (Boo, E. 1990).

Nature/ecotourists are also generally willing to spend more, to make an active contribute to conservation causes or community development by their visit or during their visit. Part of the attraction to the ecotourist or dedicated nature tourist is the ability to experience an undeveloped area which is in stark contrast to the urban existence of many travellers from the industrialised world. They are looking for something new and meaningful (Boo, E. 1990; Ziffer, K. 1989).

Thus ecotourism can be promoted without excessive capital requirements and infrastructure developments. Though this may mean there is no need to build a concrete hotel inside a park with air-conditioning and TV, it does not mean that nothing needs to be done to cater for ecotourists. It is very important that a quality experience be offered.

Quality includes considerations such as the amount and type of information and interpretation, the environmental and cultural sensitivity and skills of guides and park managers, the level of professionalism, dedication and hospitality exhibited by all involved, the degree of local community involvement, the direction of fees paid by the ecotourists to conservation and local community development projects...

There is an inherent risk, however, in assuming that everyone calling themselves an ecotourist is environmentally sensitive and aware. Amongst those included in the definition of ecotourist are those persons who visit a natural place for a few days, unlikely to ever return...they may not care of the long-term repercussions of their activities, especially if they have paid a considerable amount for their travel. The phenomenon of affluent tourists jet-setting the world to visit famous natural sites has been coined the "this year the Galapagos, next year Antarctica" syndrome (Gater, E. 1994:77).

4.0. Environmental Education and Awareness
There are initiatives underway in Vietnam to improve environmental education in schools in Vietnam, however it is still obvious that lack of environmental education and information for students (from pre-school level up), the general public, tourists and local communities alike is a major problem in developing sustainable ecotourism. Environmental education and information dissemination is of prime importance to the realisation of genuine, sustainable ecotourism or nature tourism in Vietnam. We need to educate the tourists, both present and potential, both domestic and international.

- Where are all the interpretative and environmental information centres in national parks and nature reserves in Vietnam?

- Investing in such centres is investing in the future, investing for sustainability. Should they be given greater priority than the purchase of vehicles, or even the building of large new park headquarters?

- Is it not essential that every new park HQ have an interpretive/environmental information centre included?

Allocating the space is not all however; the centres need to have extensive materials developed, staff trained in management, hospitality skills, language, culture of local communities, environmental education and sustainable tourism.

There is the very real danger that any ecotourism initiative/project in Vietnam will be overtaken, overrun, swamped by mass tourism to natural areas, or general nature-based tourism (that has none, or only some of the principles of ecotourism). A problem not only of lack of environmental awareness but also simply because of sheer numbers!

“The National Parks in North America are being "loved to death" by almost 400 million visitors in 1991 "trampling over the fragile habitat, ruining the flora with the pollution from their cars, scaring the animals, destroying the wilderness..." In Kenya, the central circuit of Amboseli National Park has been reduced to semi-desert by visitors’ vehicles, while in the Maasai Mara, which receives 200,000 visitors a year, the construction of a large number of lodges outside the controlled area threatens to overload the system.” (WWF/Tourism Concern 1992:6).

5.0. Supply-oriented management

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

Ecotourism faces considerable challenges, not least is the challenge to keep foremost a supply-oriented management perspective. 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. Essentially a supply-oriented management perspective puts the resource - national park, protected area, local culture and community - before the demands of tourists. 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.

6.0. Who is responsible for ecotourism?

Ecotourism/nature tourism cannot be solely developed by the Ministry or government agency of tourism or by the national park department as tourism crosses over many sectors. There is a need for strong interagency cooperation and linkages. This could be achieved through a Sustainable (Eco) Tourism Task-force. The Task-force could be responsible for working towards the development of a national ecotourism or nature tourism strategy for Vietnam (Figure 5), which could have as goals the establishment of a Sustainable (Eco) Tourism Association and Sustainable (Eco) Tourism Commission

Further, ecotourism needs cooperative, collaborative arrangements between govt at all levels, parks, NGOs, local communities, tour operators. In developing a national ecotourism strategy, these stakeholders need to be
fully included in the process.

Figure 5: National Eco/Nature Tourism Strategy for Vietnam

If Vietnam wants to promote nature tourism; tourism to both protected areas and NON protected natural areas, then it needs to develop a national ecotourism or nature tourism strategy. We recommend that a **Thinktank on the Development of a National Ecotourism Strategy** be convened as a first step.

The objectives of the Think-tank could be to gather together key decision makers and implementers from the tourism, planning, environmental, educational, socio-economic sectors in Vietnam to:

1. discuss the need for a National Ecotourism Strategy (NES) or Nature Tourism Strategy (NNTS) for Vietnam;
2. clarify where or to what extent tourism and ecotourism can occur in protected and non-protected natural areas in Vietnam, by clarifying what use rules apply to the different categories of protected areas ie: nature reserves, national parks, marine/coastal zones etc;
3. learn about ecotourism, alternative tourism and sustainable tourism principles and management tools, actions/strategies…;
4. learn about the development and composition of National Ecotourism Strategies from other countries, their implementation and component activities or programmes;
5. consider options for a national definition of ecotourism;
6. suggest key elements of a NES or National Nature Tourism Strategy (NNTS);
7. draft a methodology and timetable for the development of a draft Strategy;
8. call for recommendations/nominations for working groups or agencies to be responsible for actively developing key elements of the Strategy according to the agreed timetable;
9. call for recommendations/nominations for the body responsible for carrying forward the initiative ie: ‘tying it all together’, and
10. consider the areas in which Vietnam/the above bodies require capacity strengthening/training/technical advice to assist in the development and implementation of the NES/NNTS.

7.0. Tour operators

Tour operators are an extremely important component of successful ecotourism. The way they function, their choice of destination, the way they package and sell trips, the type of support services they provide, and their cost structure, are all important factors to understand how to make changes in the way nature tourism impacts host countries.

It is important that the role of private small business in the tourism industry be recognised and encouraged. Private operators (or guest houses or guide services etc) are often smaller than government owned operations. They have the potential to be more efficient, flexible and innovative...in a carefully controlled and regulated ecotourism market. Small is supposed to be beautiful in ecotourism.

It is also essential that cases of Eco-Exploitation: using ‘green’ or ‘eco’ to falsely sell a tourism product that is far from ecologically responsible or sustainable, are exposed, whether the culprits are state or private operators.

**A quote:**
"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 ecotourism being a force for the environment or simply being another threat." (Figgis, P., 1993)

A good step, if Vietnam wants to promote sustainable tourism, would be to develop, adopt and disseminate National Codes of Conduct or Practice for Sustainable Tourism and Ecotourism. A formal system of accreditation - such as a ‘green stars’ system could be considered and worked on for ecotourism operators (see Appendix 1, Crinions Green Star System for Accreditation of Tour Operators). Non compliance to such a ‘green stars’ system by those proclaiming to be ecotourism operators would mean they are required to disassociate from (not use) the term ecotourism.

Ideally, these activities should be undertaken in co-operation and consultation with all tourism stakeholders, not decided by government alone, in order to ensure acceptance of the measures. How to get such a consultation process going? How about looking at allowing the establishment of a non-government body to bring together all operators in Vietnam - a Vietnam Sustainable (Eco) Tourism Association? Could the Chamber of Commerce and Industry’s proposed Business Council for Sustainable Development play a valuable role?

This Association could work together with the Sustainable (Eco) Tourism Task-force to establish an independent Sustainable (Eco) Tourism Commission to be responsible for assessment, certification and policing of the industry. The Commission could have broad representation from the various stakeholder segments eg: government; protected area managers; hotels; tour operators; travel agents; guides; foreign tour operators; airlines; transport firms; local authorities; conservation organisations; NGOs (Elper-Wood, M. 1998).

The Ecotourism Society has produced Guidelines for Nature Tour Operators, which our Project is going to translate into Vietnamese, hopefully for distribution nation wide. In the future, such guidelines could be adopted by managers of protected areas as rigorous standards as part of a supply-oriented management regime. Though this may undermine freedom to practice for all and any tour operator, and incur considerable additional costs, operators, whether state or private, would have to comply.

The challenge is for host countries, regions and national parks to enlist the support of operators, for the purposes of conservation, education of tourists, appropriate behaviour etc, not simply rely on imposing restrictions from above. Co-operative partnerships need to be formed.

Figure 4: Tour Operators Segmentation.

Practices need to be established that prevent the do’ers - those operators who are pro-active and eager to cooperate on constructive conservation and community development projects, who are active in conserving and improving the areas they visit - from being placed at a competitive disadvantage in the industry.

Pro-active “Do’ers” in the tourism industry: sharing responsibilities

Boo (1990) notes that small companies visiting national parks seem to be contributing more to conservation than large ones. She provides an example of a responsible operator, ‘Journeys’ in the US, which donates a portion of the land costs of their trips to a non-profit conservation organisation and offers ‘active conservation tours’ such as a cleanup of the Machu Pichu trail.

Multatuli Travel in the Netherlands establishes relationships with local NGOs in Indonesia, Philippines and elsewhere and brings tourists to visit and contribute to their development projects.

Tour participants of such tours are likely to make contributions of their own. There are many more examples...

Such operators should not be placed at a disadvantage in the competitive tourism industry for being so environmentally aware, responsible and pro-active, rather they should be acknowledged and in doing so the level playing field would be raised for the entire industry, so that others will also...
8.0. Local, community participation

- What is the main reason for developing ecotourism?

- Is it purely economic ie: is it to be used for generating foreign currency for national or provincial general revenue?

- Is it for developmental purposes ie: to provide local, rural communities with the opportunity to raise their standard of living and quality of life, increase their participation in natural resource management and conservation?

- Is it for conservation, ie: to provide national parks with the opportunity to strengthen conservation capabilities through increased income, and community participation in ecotourism?

Tourism to protected/natural areas can benefit rural, remote regions when other industries are centred on cities and towns, ports and transportation routes. There is a growing gap between the rural and urban areas in Vietnam, the former are missing out on many of the benefits and advancements of a more open economy...Ecotourism can assist in spreading the benefits of development, stimulating economic activity and growth and provide an opportunity for diversification of the economy (Boo, E. 1990).

Ecotourism can be a tool for conservation and rural development, but this will only materialise

"If a concerted effort is made to incorporate local populations into the tourism industry. Involvement with local people and consequent rural development will not happen automatically. In some cases [including Vietnam] tourism to protected areas is not benefiting the surrounding population. Nature [eco] tourism will not contribute to rural development unless rural people are brought into the planning and development of the industry" (Boo, E. 1990:49).

The Galapagos Islands of Ecuador, a UNESCO natural heritage site, have suffered considerable social conflicts (in addition to severe environmental problems) due to tourism.

"Competition between the wealthier tourism sector and others is producing direct cultural conflict, aggravated by the fact that most of the tourism labour force is brought in from mainland Ecuador. Newcomers now outnumber those who grew up with and learned to value the special, fragile nature of the islands" (WWF/Tourism Concern 1992:14)

Careful consideration should also be made to the distribution of benefits of ecotourism amongst local populations - does the project benefit the local poor, often ethnic minority population, or is it controlled by local elites and hence reinforce long-standing inequalities between the majority and minority groups? (Ziffer, K. 1989).

In elephant conservation projects on wildlife reserves in Zambia, local people, including former poachers, have been provided stable jobs and incomes as guards and tourist and hunting safari guides through training initiatives. This has raised the quality of safari tours (WWF/Tourism Concern 1992: 29)

What is the extent of participation? Ecotourism projects are often directed by expatriates who are not necessarily familiar with local conditions and needs. Training local people to manage their own projects can avoid misunderstanding and possible hostility. Training should thus not only be for low paid and low status jobs, but for higher level management jobs.

Local resentment to being cut-off from the benefits of tourism can be explosive. An oft-cited case is the Maasai in Kenya. Widespread resentment exists amongst the Maasai nomadic pastoralists over the inadequate compensation paid to them for their displacement from traditional grazing lands with the establishment of national parks. The Maasai have resorted to killing wildlife in the parks in protest. Experience shows that with local people fully integrated into tourism projects, and receiving the benefits, infringements such as tree felling (Nepal) and poaching of wildlife (Zimbabwe) reduce markedly (Cater, E. 1994 in Cater, E. & Lowman, G).
It is important to be aware of the abuse of the term "participation". Participatory approaches have been used in some cases to increase acceptability of tourism projects and as a means to detect potential conflicts and mitigate 'local threats' early on, rather than being truly committed to fostering democratic decision-making and empowerment of local people (Pleumarom, A 1997:6). Participation means different things in different societies and political structures. The level of participation will influence the sustainability and success of ecotourism in Vietnam.

"Quite clearly, employment is no substitute for sustainable access to resources. The ‘hire the natives’ approach to compensation also tends to create a small salaried class of locals at the same time that exclusionary policies are negatively impacting the economic situation of the remainder of the community and for relations between the park and the local community" (West/Brechin 1991, 394, in Pleumarom, A 1997:7).

In 1997 an interactive conference - Ecotourism at a Crossroads: Charting the Way Forward - was held by the Kenya Wildlife Service, The Ecotourism Society of Kenya and The Ecotourism Society (US). The conference’s primary purpose was to use Kenya as a case study for other nations to examine, as Kenya’s tourism industry is almost at a crisis point and requires urgent action. Participants - 300 in all - were from government (38%), private sector (35%), NGOs (18%) and local communities (9%). One of the recommendations that came out of the conference was the need for a Community Ecotourism Association to represent communities seeking to create ecotourism projects; assist them with any land use and tourism revenue distribution problems, as well as with questions of business, legal, and market plans for ecotourism (Elper-Wood, M. 1998).

9.0. Economic values, revenues and management systems

The magnitude of benefits countries receive from nature tourism/ecotourism depends in large part on the scale of the tourism, the size of the country, and the complexity of the country’s economy. The same can be said at the regional and local level (Boo, E. 1990).

Too much reliance on tourism renders an area susceptible to seasonal, economic fluctuations and changes in tourist tastes. It is best for tourism to be one of several activities, and to fit in with traditional activities eg: to compliment agriculture rather than competing with it or causing its decline (Boo, E. 1990).

Care also needs to be taken to not place excessive emphasis on the economic (tourism) value of parks as this can lead to decision makers believing that parks exist primarily for economic profit. If tourism then fails to meet economic expectations, other more damaging economic activities could be taken up (Sayer 1981 in Boo, E. 1990:17).

"What will happen when forests, wildlife and other natural assets are increasingly valued in monetary terms? For instance, the visitor-attraction worth of each lion at Kenya’s Amboseli Park has been estimated at US$27,000 per year and each elephant herd at US$610,000 (Lindberg 1991:6). To stress the profit-making potential of ecotourism, will the next step be to calculate the visitor attraction worth of a Maasai, a Karen or an Igorot?" (Pleumarom, A., 1997:6)

OR a H’mong, Tay, Dao?!

In Vietnam, as in other countries, a hindrance to developing sustainable ecotourism is the problem of ‘general revenue’. That is, park tourism revenue becomes general revenue for the central government, and/or provincial government, and there is considerable uncertainty about how much will be returned to the park as its budget allocation each year.

This system can hinder conservation and also ecotourism:

- it makes the protected areas highly susceptible to government budget cuts during economic downturns;
- it does little to encourage local park personnel to develop and participate in ecotourism or improve training in tourism;
- it does little to encourage the park to provide or improve educational information for tourists;
• it does little to promote conservation and strengthen commitment to and pride in the park (Boo, E. 1990).

Development of ecotourism requires improved internal and financial management incentives. It requires a dedicated portion of park revenue to be controlled by park management to provide an incentive for efficient administration (with some still going to central government so that national support for the parks will be maintained) (Ziffer, K. 1989).

With such a system in place ecotourists will be satisfied as they generally like to know, or even demand to know, how the money they pay is spent on conservation and development projects. If they know it is not simply going to general revenue they are more likely to make voluntary contributions.

It cannot be assumed that protected areas will be able to generate sufficient tourist revenues to be self sufficient. In many cases tourism should not be considered as a path towards self-sufficiency but as a means to defray the costs of operations. Ecotourism will not be appropriate for all protected areas in Vietnam, nor for all parts of a particular protected area (Ziffer, K. 1989:24).

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**Nepal and the Annapurna Area: the environmental impact of uncontrolled tourism to natural areas**

Tourism is one of the main sources of foreign exchange income for Nepal. Each year, over 36,000 trekkers and 36,000 porters visit the Annapurna region which supports 40,000 local inhabitants.

About 60 per cent of these trekkers come during four months of the year. They are concentrated in few places, resulting in devastating impacts on both local cultural and natural environments.

Forest is cleared each year to construct hotels, lodges and furniture and to provide fuel for cooking, hot showers and campfires. 400,000 hectares of forest are cleared each year. This is a deforestation rate of three per cent per year. One hectare of cleared forests loses 30-75 tons of soil annually. This has led to devastating landslides and floods.

86 per cent of Nepal’s energy comes from forests. In the Annapurna virtually everybody depends on fuelwood for cooking as there are no alternative sources of energy. The total daily wood consumption by and on behalf of each trekker equals the amount used by a Nepalese family of five for a week.

Tree lines have been raised and entire ridges previously cloaked in rhododendron (one of the attractions of the area and Nepal’s national flower) denuded. Few trees are left within the Annapurna Sanctuary itself.

Virtually all food and housekeeping items have to be imported from Kathmandu and elsewhere, inflating local economies and introducing non-nutritious diets.

Inadequate sanitation facilities and indiscriminate practices by tourists and trekking groups have left virtual ‘minefields’ of human excreta and toilet paper. Toilets, if they exist at all, are often dangerously close to water sources. Non-biodegradable litter such as plastics, tins and bottles, used primarily by tourists, are disposed of in nearby streams or strewn in piles at the edge of the settlements.

Tourism, as a messenger of outside values and behaviours, has also affected local cultures. Village youths are easy prey to the seductiveness of Western consumer culture as tourists are laden with expensive trappings: hi-tech hiking gear, flashy clothes, cameras and electronic goods.

The Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP) was established in 1986 as a response to the above problems. The project, implemented by the King Mahendra Trust for Nature Conservation (NGO), addresses three main aspects simultaneously: nature conservation, human development and tourism management.

ACAP strives to ensure that the beneficiaries from trekking tourism and conservation activities will be the local people, at the same time making them the guardians of their resources. The approach is that of a grassroots philosophy that strongly discourages a handout philosophy. As a result traditional subsistence activities are woven into a framework of sound resource management, supplemented by small scale conservation and alternative energy projects to minimise the impact of tourists and
In our recent visit to Ba Be National Park, we were upset to hear that the Park does not charge an entrance fee, rather this is collected by the local district authorities, with none of the revenue being given to the Park. It has also been said that both the Park and the district authorities are charging entrance fees for international visitors. Is this not bad publicity?

There appear to be tensions between the Park and district and provincial authorities. These tensions seem to be related to some extent to disagreement over the development of tourism in the Park and lack of clarity on the responsibilities for tourism in the Park.

The Park seems almost ‘anti-tourism’, or rather scared of it. This is not surprising if the Park feels powerless to exert any control over the development and growth of tourism, particularly if it is mass tourism.

The Park has the potential for small, controlled, low impact trekking ecotourism that includes overnight stays in villages within the park. The villages can hence benefit from tourism to the park by charging overnight and meal fees, as well as through the sale of agricultural produce (fruits, home cultivated NTFPs such as mushrooms and orchids and honey) and crafts. Residents from the villages can also be trained in language and guiding skills and employed by the park to lead the trekking tours. The present system of issuing permits for overnight stays needs radical change if local villages are to be allowed to benefit from ecotourism.

However, despite the potential, if the government’s aim is to increase mass tourism (albeit nature-based tourism) to the area, and the Park has no control over tourism within its boundaries, any ecotourism initiative started could be overrun, in a short period of time.

For example, local authorities have begun to promote the Tay new rice festival as a means to bring in more tourists. Last year approximately 10,000 persons visited over a two day period. Naturally the lake is the major feature of the park, and over 100 diesel powered boats appeared to serve the crowds of tourists. The Park is very concerned with the use of diesel engines by locals, which are causing both water and noise pollution. Is this use compatible with an ecotourism experience and conservation of the park?

Lack of co-operation and unclear management responsibilities will be detrimental in the long run to conservation of the area and the development of ecotourism.

10.0. Small and local is beautiful?

Ecotourism is concerned with small scale, locally owned, built, managed facilities. Ecotourism has three important benefits for developing countries:

1. facilities and infrastructure are simpler and less expensive than those demanded by conventional mass tourism;

2. being locally owned and operated ecotourism projects are not caught up in the need to conform to corporate Western multinational tourism concerns, and therefore can have a much higher input of local products, materials and labour. This means greater multiplier effects in the local economy, and also reduces import leakages and the remittances from expatriate labour which result from large-scale, foreign owned operations;

3. profits accrue locally instead of flowing back to the parent country (Cater, E. 1994 in Cater, E. & Lowman, G:70)

BUT investing in ecotourism in developing countries is lucrative. In the face of foreign investors, try to think small and local. If foreign money is required, find the right partner, whether a company or an NGO, who has a more philanthropic bent, who understands the philosophy of ecotourism and has experience in ecotourism.
Vietnam is currently concerned with attracting foreign investment in tourism, in drawing up master plans for areas with large scale tourism and recreation projects to the sum of millions of USD dollars. Such scales and priorities are not appropriate for ecotourism.

The benefits of ecotourism to Vietnam can be lost due to:

- the international organisation of ecotourism (tours agents and other middlemen in host countries take their percentages);
- foreign investment in ecotourism (revenue is returned to the investor’s country);
- inflationary pressures at a local level due to foreign involvement (demand for produce, materials, imported goods etc);
- loss of sovereignty with foreign ‘take-over’, and
- lack of participation of locals (in employment, training, management and operation etc). Locals may also be excluded from the natural attraction, their ‘backyard’, by price or other means.

A World Resources Institute report noted that Zimbabwe retains only an estimated 10% of nature tourism expenditures, while the Annapurna region in Nepal retains less than 10% (Ziffer, K. 1989:27). In Belize, 65% of the Belize Tourism Industry Association (a US-Aid initiative) are expatriates (Cater, E. 1994 in Cater, E. & Lowman, G :73).

It is somewhat disturbing to hear that tourism developments (involving foreign investment) of Dan Kia resort near Da Lat, the Victoria Hotel in Sa Pa, the Dong Mo Cultural Village in Ha Tay are ecotourism developments.

11.0. Conclusion and recommendations

There is no example of tourist use that is completely without impact. Ecotourism does leave a mark on protected areas. It is a compromise that allows tourism but set limits, controls, strict management systems, monitoring feedback mechanisms etc. It is a compromise between the primary role of protected areas - protection and preservation of the environment - and providing local communities with development opportunities that can at the same time enhance conservation goals, if carried out properly.

Ecotourism can effect and influence mainstream mass tourism, and indeed it can help make the rest of the tourism industry adopt more sustainable principles and act more responsibly and sustainably. This phenomenon is observable around the world.

However, I would argue that now Vietnam needs to be concerned with trying to make the entire tourism industry sustainable, not focus on ecotourism to achieve sustainable tourism development. In relying on, and waiting for ecotourism to reform the rest of the industry irreparable damage may be done and reforms, if they occur at all, will come slowly and may come too late. Ecotourism and sustainable tourism principles need to be adopted together in a two-pronged approach.

Figure 6: Key factors required for successful ecotourism (many!)

- Aim for strategic, holistic and detailed planning;
- Careful and integrated management:
  a. forging strong inter ministerial co-operation between the ministries of planning and investment, science technology and environment, tourism, education and training, agriculture and rural development, and
  b. being committed to management that facilitates and ensures input from all stakeholders: tour operators, protected area managers, government, NGOs, local communities etc;
- Establish a national Sustainable (Eco) Tourism Task force to develop a National Ecotourism or Nature Tourism Strategy;

- Create an environment conducive to the establishment of a private sector Ecotourism Association, Independent Ecotourism Commission and Community Ecotourism Association;

- Intervene in the market eg: fees to protected areas, limits on numbers, regulations and Codes of Conduct for the industry (developed with the industry);

- Consider each natural area individually (eco and env impacts of tourism, what the area has to offer, local community needs and interaction with the environment, local infrastructure etc);

- Focus on the local and regional level - it is easier for nature tourism/ecotourism to be developed successfully at these levels;

- Start small and go slow;

- Believe that small is beautiful and quality is paramount;

- Invest in awareness raising, education and training for tourists, tour operators, local guides, protected area managers, local communities, local authorities;

- Aim to maximise local benefits for conservation and economic development;

- Aim to maximise local participation and involvement at all levels;

- Aim to maximise use of local products, materials;

- Aim to focus on recycling, waste management, alternative technologies and fuels. Manuals have been produced that provide practical information on such topics, we have a few and will be getting more;

Constantly monitor and evaluate and develop a feedback mechanism for modifying growth and minimising impacts and setting limits.

APPENDIX I

Crinion’s Green Stars for Accreditation of Ecotourism Operators

- having a business plan that outlines environmental ethic and practice

- using environmentally friendly products and engaging in recycling practices

- providing good quality pre and post information to the intending visitor

- containing high local/indigenous participation/expertise

- providing high integrity interesting/entertaining educational/interpretive information

- providing high level of staff training about the natural and cultural environment

- providing high net benefit for the local community

- visitor experiences are of relatively undisturbed natural environment

- having management plan (including capacity limits or limits to acceptable change)

- involving personalised/guided small group interaction
using low/medium cost/low impact accommodation and infrastructure

using facilities that are ecologically designed and operated

monitoring and response mechanisms are in place up-front

contributing revenue to, or is part of conservation programme.

One way to preserve the 'eco brand', in the interest of ensuring the consumers expectations are met, is that before any operator can promote under the accredited 'ecotourism brand' the operation should achieve at least a 7 star rating. The consumer can then be more confident that the experience will meet expectations. The higher the star rating the higher the expectations of a genuine ecotourism experience. (Crinion 1993:10)

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