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## **An Analysis of Challenges Facing the Growth and Development of Ecotourism**

Kendall Hovius  
Student  
Barry University  
kendall.hovius@mymail.barry.edu

Leesa Hovius  
Student  
Stockton University  
hoviusl@go.stockton.edu

**Noel Criscione-Naylor, EdD**  
Associate Professor of Hospitality, Tourism and Event Management Studies  
Stockton University  
noel.criscione@stockton.edu

### ***ABSTRACT***

*Ecotourism focuses on minimizing tourism impact through responsible travel, conservation, and education. Conservation of at-risk areas is incredibly important to preserving the health of ecosystems as well as improving the well-being of the local people. Furthermore, ecotourism is a much-needed tourism outlet that contributes to the economic development of destinations and political empowerment of local communities. Ecotourism provides an opportunity for tourists to experience the natural beauties and wonders of the world and demonstrates what could be lost without conservation efforts. However, with the increased commodification of the natural world, and exposing these regions to humans, there are risks. This industry commentary article compiles data from existing, published research on how countries have reduced risks and increased benefits through ecotourism, including in marine areas, to influence a universal strategy for developing destinations.*

### **Keywords**

Ecotourism, marine ecotourism, sustainable tourism, tourism

### **INTRODUCTION**

Ecotourism development originated in the 1980s in response to tourists' behavioral impact on natural regions and fragile ecosystems. As a subset of sustainable tourism, ecotourism focuses on responsible travel to natural areas, conserving the environment, and improving the well-being of the local people (TIES, 2015). Furthermore, ecotourism focuses on educating tourists while supporting the development of resources for ecological conservation, directly benefiting the economic development and political empowerment of local communities (TIES, 2015). As ecotourism has continued to evolve, it has also focused on fostering respect for different cultures and human rights to allow future generations to experience destinations relatively untouched by human behavior (TIES, 2015). Accordingly, ecotourism is focused on ecological conservation and education, while sustainable tourism has focused on travel that has minimal impact on destinations and the local community. A particularly fragile, and vital, subset of destinations is marine areas, which are often overlooked. (Thorburn, et al., 2021). Organizations such as The International Ecotourism Society promote ecotourism practices globally.

The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) defines ecotourism as “responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people and involves interpretation and education” (TIES, 2015). To promote responsible travel, there must be a focus on educating not only visitors but the staff of ecotourism destinations as well. Furthermore, TIES clarifies the three principles of ecotourism through which destination organizations and service providers can adopt non-consumptive/non-extractive practices, service experiences create ecological consciousness, and service providers develop eco-centric values and ethics in staff and visitors in relation to experiencing nature (TIES, 2015). The Marine Bio-Conservation Society (2022) extends the definition of sustainable ecotourism as “encompassing the responsible use of natural resources for recreation that extend to marine areas.” Together, these principles minimize tourism impact and promote conservation, communities, and sustainable travel (TIES, 2015). Despite these principles that make up the sustainable ecotourism framework, there are still concerns and mismanagement of resources, as well as a lack of promotion of responsible travel (Wang, et al., 2021).

Furthermore, as tourists seek new adventures and frontiers, additional focus has been placed on ocean and marine environments and their protections. The commodification of the natural world continues to expose species and places to human impact that may result in further damage. For some, this potential risk is too great, and as a result these areas are not available for human interaction (Takashina, Tanaka, 2022). However, others believe ecotourism is a necessary economic resource for many destinations, providing jobs and a market for local people and products (Cusack et al., 2021). The banning of ecotourism would remove this vital source of economic stimulation, and that leads to a dilemma of how to approach ecotourism in the modern age. This industry commentary article compiles data from existing, published research on how countries have reduced risks and increased benefits in marine areas to influence a universal strategy for developing destinations.

## **INDUSTRY CONTEXT**

“Sustainable Tourism refers to sustainable practices in and by the tourism industry, it is an aspiration for the impacts of all forms of tourism – all forms of tourism should be sustainable” (GSTC, 2022). According to the World Tourism Organization, sustainable tourism should address economic, social, and environmental impacts, as well as the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment, and host communities (GSTC, 2022). Ecotourism seeks to promote responsible travel through ecological conservation and education. To achieve this, destinations must focus the attention of visitors on observation and appreciation of nature and the traditional cultures of the area, offer experiences that contain educational features, minimize negative impacts that visitors may have on nature and the local community, and allocate resources to support the maintenance of the areas visited (GSTC, 2022). Accordingly, The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) defines ecotourism as “responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people and involves interpretation and education with the specification that education is to staff and guests.” TIES focuses on clarifying principles of ecotourism in which practices are non-consumptive/non-extractive, create ecological consciousness, and practice incorporate ecocentric values and ethics in relation to nature (TIES, 2015). The principles of ecotourism and sustainable tourism seek to minimize tourism impact on the destination and local communities, promote conservation of the areas visited, and encourage responsible use of natural resources for recreation in marine areas (Marine Bio-Conservation Society, 2022; TIES, 2015). Despite this call for greater responsibility placed on destinations and visitors, there are many challenges destinations face that need attention, including the allocation and use of resources for conservation and education (Wang, et al., 2021).

Tourism goals should be to increase economic benefits for host communities, organizations, and authorities, provide alternative employment and income generating opportunities, and raise awareness of

the conservation of a region (GSTC, 2022). A mathematical analysis of the impacts and stresses of tourism found that a high level of ecotourism attraction causes a significant decline in ecological status (Takashina & Tanaka, 2022). To limit this, many locations have implemented measures such as a quota system, closing areas, increasing visitor fees, and reducing the size of visiting parties (Takashina & Tanaka, 2022). These measures are used not only for mitigating harm to ecosystems, but to provide safety and accommodations to visitors. Other ways that humans impact ecosystems are through fragmentation and modifying natural disturbances, such as wildfires or floods. These impact multiple ecosystems on a large timescale, with an environmental legacy, such as run-off from soil damaging coral reefs and making it difficult to measure them accurately within a short time frame. However, long-term monitoring can provide greater insights into the impact and related environmental changes (Takashina & Tanaka, 2022).

In one case, the World Tourism Organization, in cooperation with British Columbia, found that tourism brought \$9.5 billion into the province's economy, drawing 22.5 million visitors and creating 11,980 direct jobs (Gumede & Nzama, 2021). A tourist dollar brings new money into a local economy, increasing job opportunities and employment as porters, cooks, and guides, to list a few. It also allows for the development of products and infrastructure, further increasing economic input. The need for proper management through effective policies and planning ensures proper preservation of environmental regions (Gumede & Nzama, 2021). Ecotourism stimulates the development of transport service, promotes conservation, generates income for park management, and brings income to rural populations (Gumede & Nzama, 2021).

Ecologically fragile areas present serious problems in developing appropriate ecotourism practices in a region. Although local governments may claim to protect the environment through ecotourism, the uneven distribution of resources in a destination may cause damage in the pursuit of higher priority interests (Wang, et al., 2021). Because of challenges between development before protection, and protection after development, further damage may occur as tourism enterprises follow local policies but maximize short-term benefits. This brings concerns to the forefront as to which existing methods of incentivizing cooperation work, by what mechanisms they work, and the impacts of these approaches (Wang, et al., 2021). Successful long-term ecotourism hinges on multiple stakeholders, such as local and regional governments, and businesses in the area, all with different roles, but working collaboratively and transparently (Wang, et al., 2021).

There are some areas that are of particular focus when it comes to sustainable ecotourism practices, including those focused on the ocean and marine environment. Orams (2013) defines marine tourism as including "those recreational activities that involve travel away from one's place of residence and which have as their host or focus the marine environment." More specifically, marine and coastal tourism includes shore-based activities, such as land-based whale watching, reef walking, cruise ship supply and yachting events, within the overall ambit of marine tourism (Hall, 2001). In the Philippines, local conditions enabled several activities to develop around marine ecotourism. Their tourism centered on nearshore fringing reefs, the establishment of nearshore protected areas, and large herring aggregation, rather than the typical charismatic megafauna (Cusack et al., 2021). As an example, overfishing has done severe damage to wild populations, and degraded stock in many communities. Because of this, alternative income generating activities are needed to allow stocks to recover and stimulate the economy of these areas by reducing reliance on fishing as a source of income. Through statistical analysis, an economic valuation of the ecotourism industry was found, and compared to an estimate of the extractive value of the herring. The ecotourism industry provided enough economic boost to offset the loss of fishing as a source of revenue. A significantly impactful marine ecotourism system has formed due to a combination of strong community engagement, a collection of locally managed marine protected areas,

and the retention and distribution of economic benefits within this local community (Cusack et al., 2021). These conditions were then contextualized into a set of requirements that could be used to expand potential income sources in coastal communities that currently rely on fishing.

## **DISCUSSION**

Through a review of existing literature, an analysis of the current methods of implementing ecotourism, and the success of them, has been conducted. One of the largest problems, as found by Wang (2021), is that many areas use the banner of ecotourism without providing any ecological support. Another problem noted by Takashina (2022) is that a high influx of tourists to an area, even with supports in place, will still cause damage. Other areas lack the information to implement ecotourism, even when it will bolster their economy, such as in the tropical fishing regions in the Philippines, as found by Cusack (2021).

The commonality between these problems is a lack of proper management, and a strict set of guidelines for a region. Any organization or area can claim it is participating in ecotourism, but there are no regulations for that, or an overarching regulatory body to enforce accountability. Current methods of incentivizing ecotourism do not account for this, leaving many regions ecologically fragile (Wang, et al., 2021). Without stabilizing developing ecotourism, the individual choices of local governments, tourism enterprises, and residents each work against each other, preventing a region from developing properly. Wang (2021) finds that a dynamic penalty-incentive control method could encourage stakeholders, such as tourism enterprises, to adhere to the principles of ecotourism. These penalties and incentives include the losses from not implementing ecotourism and the cost of it for tourism enterprises, reputation losses and gains for local governments based on supervisory measures, and rewards to residents for participating in environmental protection (Wang, et al., 2021).

Lack of local interest and empowerment also challenges ecotourism development. In Nigeria, a dearth of resources for employees working in ecotourism has led the employees to participate in behavior that challenges sustainability. These behaviors include the exploitation of tourists and participation in poaching. Exploitation, such as being forced to pay to take pictures by unknown agents and being harassed by security agents, prevents many tourists from visiting these areas. Being unable to properly maintain facilities, such as roads and tours, also drives off huge swathes of tourists, and creates further economic struggles (Gumede & Nzama, 2021). Proper information on location and visitor data is lacking, or when it exists, is used for political purposes. Other threats to development include poverty, poaching, over-hunting, negative global image, lack of maintenance, poor road conditions, corruption, internal insecurity, inadequate funding, and inadequate infrastructure (Gumede & Nzama, 2021).

Marine ecotourism, “recreational activities that involve travel away from one’s place of residence and which have as their host or focus the marine environment (where the marine environment is defined as those waters which are saline, and tide affected)” is one of the most complex forms of ecotourism, and tourism as a whole (Thorburn, et al., 2021). Its management requires a holistic view of the various factors. It is connected and interdependent with both the blue economy, which is the sustainable use of ocean resources for social and ecological well-being, and other forms of tourism. Sustainable tourism is not often a priority, as shown especially in New Zealand, where \$200 million was spent on growing visitor numbers, but only \$50 million was used to grow the environmental infrastructure needed to support that growth (Thorburn, et al., 2021). To construct a more sustainable and well managed system requires taking the needs of both the community and the environment into account, and local operators in the field should be active in the development of policy and best practice (Thorburn, et al., 2021).

## CONCLUSION

There are three major principles to properly implement ecotourism; that it be non-consumptive, create an ecological conscience, and hold ecocentric values and ethics (TIES, 2015). Guidelines to maintain a standard of ecotourism have been developed by various organizations to combat common problems, and share similar considerations. Each list of guidelines tends to consist of minimizing impacts; building awareness and respect for the native life and people; financial benefits for conservation, local communities, and industry; sustainable use of resources; and community empowerment (MarineBio, 2021; TIES, 2015). In practice, this means limiting the numbers of visitors to an area, involving the local community in the various aspects of ecotourism, and education on what sustainable resource use involves. It is vital that local governments, residents, and visitors and tourism enterprises all involve themselves in proper development and management (Wang, et al., 2021).

Proper management of ecotourism in both the development and growth is key to ensuring it is sustainable and beneficial for both the locals and the environment. Broadly applicable guidelines are available but must be tailored to fit a region based on its unique needs, rather than treated as a one-size-fits-all panacea. While guidelines are imperative, there is not enough existing information to attempt to narrow down how those guidelines should be tailored, and who should be responsible for ensuring compliance. This is especially important in the marine ecotourism industry, where its complex connections to other industries make it uniquely fragile.

Industry practitioners should determine which guidelines can most easily be implemented and evaluate which they find most difficult to achieve or sustain. Application of all guidelines, immediately, will generate the most benefit, but is unrealistic in practice. Tourism destinations must strategically evaluate and prioritize guidelines to maximize value and mitigate damage to the environment. This approach will also bear less of a financial strain on the tourism organizations and the local community. This research encourages further studies to evaluate and compare the implementation of various kinds of sustainable tourism and ecotourism policy by like destinations. Standardized studies into the economic and ecological impacts are also needed to inform effective decision-making.

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