

Eco-Tourism as a Sustainable Alternative to Conventional Tourism

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Abstract

Eco-tourism has been capturing attention of neo tourists, nature lovers and environmental planners for last two decades or so. Since then large body of literature has been created and much water has flown through Ganga. However, eco-tourism, due to lack of enchanting call through popular articles, still seems a distant dream to be realized. As such, a tourist will be seldom found posing himself or herself as a proud eco-tourist. This small article attempts to fill this gap.

Keywords: Alternative tourism; Eco-tourism; Tourism

Introduction

Tourism is among the world's largest industries. As consciousness is increasing, education is spreading, economy is strengthening, transport connectivity is breaking barriers of inaccessibility and reducing distance, communication is becoming ever more effective and as nations of the world are coming close to each other through the rapidly going on liberalization, privatization and globalization, the tourism industry is growing by leaps and bounds. Tourism industry is often regarded as an industry without chimneys. In other words, this industry is regarded as a non-polluting industry. However, tourism has often been cursed by those who are sensitive to cultural and environmental values. Tourism has been alleged to be an enemy of cultures and environment. It infests the pristine cultures by inducing cultural values' erosion effect and, often uses the immaculate cultures for tourists' own benefits (it goes even to the extent of 'sex tours') as has come to light in some southeast countries.

Nevertheless, despite its negative ecological, social, and cultural implications, it is almost impossible to wish away tourism. Tourism is so close to human psyche that we cannot imagine human life without tourism. Of course, its negative implications must be properly addressed and it must be turned into an industry of social, cultural and ecological values. Eco-tourism is perceived as an alternative to the conventional tourism.

Concept

Eco-tourism, as the name suggests, deals with the living part of the natural environments. According to the definition provided by Wikipedia, eco-tourism is a form of tourism involving fragile, pristine, and relatively undisturbed natural areas, intended as a low-impact and often small scale alternative to standard commercial (mass) tourism. Eco-tourism focuses on socially responsible travel, personal growth, and environmental sustainability. It typically involves travel to destinations where flora, fauna and cultural heritage are the primary attractions. Eco-tourism is intended to offer tourists insight into the impact of human beings on the environment, and to foster a greater appreciation of our natural habitats. Its defined objects, as explained by Wikipedia, are: i) to educate traveler, ii) to provide fund for ecological conservation, iii) to directly benefit economic development, iii) political empowerment of local communities, iv) to foster respect for different cultures and for human rights.

Eco-tourism also attempts to fix certain duties for the eco-tourists to observe and contribute to the very ethics of eco-tourism. Eco-tourism includes programmes that minimize the damage inflicted by conventional tourism. Eco-tourism also calls for promoting

social-cultural integrity of local people. Environmental and social responsibilities go hand in hand in eco-tourism. Environmental management needs recycling of wastes, energy efficiency and water conservation. Eco-tourism gives emphasis on all these aspects of sound environmental management.

Conventional tourism is often impervious to the need of generating employment opportunities, especially for local populace. The eco-tourism, on the other hand, seeks such opportunities and attempts to implement the same. While the conventional tourism is neutral to the ethics of the environment and society, the eco-tourism is not. It rather respects environmental, social and cultural values.

When we evaluate the environmental, social and cultural impacts of the conventional tourism, we often come to conclusion that it must be replaced by some sound alternative. The eco-tourism appears to be an alternative, but a sound alternative or just for the namesake – that is the question. We need to be more serious in planning and implementing the eco-tourism so that it proves itself to be a sound alternative to the conventional tourism and all-creative in its approach.

Environmentally responsible travel to natural areas, in order to enjoy and appreciate nature (and accompanying cultural features, both past and present) that promote conservation, have a low visitor impact and provide for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local peoples [1].

Eco-tourism focuses on local cultures, wilderness adventures, volunteering, personal growth and learning new ways to live on our vulnerable planet. It is typically defined as travel to destinations where the flora, fauna, and cultural heritage are the primary attractions. Responsible ecotourism includes programs that minimize the adverse effects of traditional tourism on the natural environment, and enhance the cultural integrity of local people. Therefore, in addition to evaluating environmental and cultural factors, initiatives by hospitality providers to promote recycling, energy efficiency, water re-use, and the creation of economic opportunities for local communities are an integral part of ecotourism.

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Most tourism in natural areas today is not ecotourism and is not, therefore, sustainable. Ecotourism is distinguished by its emphasis on conservation, education, traveler responsibility and active community participation. Specifically, ecotourism possesses the following characteristics [2]:

- Conscientious, low-impact visitor behavior
- Sensitivity towards, and appreciation of, local cultures and biodiversity
- Support for local conservation efforts
- Sustainable benefits to local communities
- Local participation in decision-making
- Educational components for both the traveler and local communities

Increased tourism to sensitive natural areas without appropriate planning and management can threaten the integrity of ecosystems and local cultures. The increase of visitors to ecologically sensitive areas can lead to significant environmental degradation. Likewise, local

communities and indigenous cultures can be harmed in numerous ways by an influx of foreign visitors and wealth. Additionally, fluctuations in climate, currency exchange rates, and political and social conditions can make over-dependence upon tourism a risky business.

However, this same growth creates significant opportunities for both conservation and local communities. Ecotourism can provide much-needed revenues for the protection of national parks and other natural areas -- revenues that might not be available from other sources [3].

Additionally, ecotourism can provide a viable economic development alternative for local communities with few other income-generating options. Moreover, ecotourism can increase the level of education and activism among travelers, making them more enthusiastic and effective agents of conservation.

References

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