

STRATEGIES FOR ECOTOURISM: WORKING WITH GLOBALIZATION

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ABSTRACT

Ecotourism combines nature tourism with responsibilities for nature conservation and social development. It is seen by international conservation and development agencies and national governments as a means to foster sustainable development. Since its emergence in the 1980s, ecotourism now outpace the growth of the global tourism industry by three times. Growth however is uneven, with many developing countries still heavily dependent on funding rather than market revenues. This may be due to a lack of infrastructure, coordination, technical capability and alignment with the global ecotourism industry. The paper argues that globalization is the main cause of this uneven development as ecotourism is very much a product of globalization and so countries that are not fully engaged in the global k-economy will not be able to share the benefits of the industry's development. To date, developing country ecotourism generally still tends to ignore the business aspect of ecotourism, focusing almost entirely on nature conservation, although there are increasing number of exceptions, e.g. Sabah, Malaysia. The paper proposes four strategies for developing countries, namely:

1. engage international NGO and technical expertise to (a) develop resources for ecotourism and (b) increase destinations' visibility through association with global knowledge networks;
2. develop products and services that meet the demands of the sophisticated ecotourism market;
3. help local and indigenous communities value and commoditise their heritage for ecotourism while safeguarding the communities against exploitation; and
4. local authority to bring together technical experts, businesses and local communities to plan, develop products and services, and develop infrastructure to facilitate ecotourism.

INTRODUCTION

Ecotourism emerged from the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 as a leading option for viable solutions to sustainable development for developing nations (WTO, 2003). It promises revenue and the preservation of a country's natural assets by tapping into the world's largest industry, but incorporating principles of nature and cultural conservation through low-impact, responsible travel.¹ Two decades later, at the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg, South Africa, the World Tourism Organisation (WTO), together with the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), launched a publication entitled *Sustainable Tourism and the Alleviation of Poverty* on 20 September 2002. The thrust of this initiative was to assist developing states to effect "social change, trade participation and poverty alleviation through sustainable tourism"². On 27 September the same year, the World Tourism Organisation (WTO) celebrated the 23rd World Tourism Day in Costa Rica with the theme, *Ecotourism: The Key to Sustainable Development*. The theme was chosen in support of the United Nation (UN)'s declaration of 2002 as the International Year of Ecotourism (IYE). In conjunction with IYE, a world summit was held in Quebec, Canada, 19-22 May, which culminated with the Quebec Declaration, detailing policy guidelines and technical information on ecotourism planning, management and development.

However, since the term was first coined in 1983, ecotourism (Ceballos-Lascurian, 1996) has developed differently in different parts of the world. In many developing countries, ecotourism is essentially conservation with little attention given to its business aspect. It is usually driven by non-governmental organisations (NGO), often with substantial funds from both government and donor agencies. A typical recommendation in developing country ecotourism is to limit the number of visitors to national parks in order to minimise environmental degradation. This however also has the effect of minimising the chance for the industry to grow, since restricting the number of visitors would effectively lower revenue gains. Consequently, ecotourism has tended to consume more from, rather than contribute to, local government budgets, which could have undesirable multiplier effects on the local economy and community.

In contrast, ecotourism is an important contributor to the economy in North and Central America, Europe, Australia and New Zealand. Costa Rica is unique as the place where ecotourism originated as an experiment in the 1980s. The success of the industry, which has surpassed banana and coffee as the country's main source of revenue, can be attributed in large parts to Hector Ceballos-Lascurian, director-general of the International Consultancy on Ecotourism, and special advisor to the World Conservation Union. According to the International Ecotourism Society (TIES), ecotourism grew 20-34 percent annually in the 1990s and by 2004, outpaced the growth of the tourism industry globally by three times. Tourism in Costa Rica, which is mostly ecotourism, earns about USD 1,000 per visitor compared to tourism in France, the world top tourist destination in 2004 according to WTO, which earns only about USD 400 per visitor (TIES, 2004).

Why, however, is ecotourism successful in some areas, particularly developed countries, but not in others? This paper will argue that a successful ecotourism strategy must work with globalization, something that most developing countries are still trying to come to grips with. It will begin by first examining the reports from the World Ecotourism Summit and its follow-up activities to identify broad patterns of ecotourism development across the globe. It will then examine the concept and business of ecotourism in an attempt to uncover the underlying reasons for its under-development in developing countries. In particular, the paper hopes to understand the circumstances created by globalization and the demand for ecotourism from a consumption theory perspective. The paper concludes by offering a set of strategies for ecotourism development, focussing on the authors' home country, Brunei Darussalam.

REGIONAL DIFFERENCES

The 2002 World Ecotourism Summit in Quebec brought together more than 100 international public, private and NGO representatives to discuss issues on (a) policy and planning, (b) regulation and institutional responsibilities and frameworks, (c) product development, marketing and promotion, and (d) monitoring costs and benefits of ecotourism to ensure equitable distribution among all stakeholders. The process began in 2000 and involved more than 20 regional conferences in preparation for the event. It culminated with the Quebec Declaration, which reaffirmed the industry's commitment to the principles of sustainable development and to assuming a "leadership role in introducing sustainable practice to the tourism sector". Planeta.com, which was chosen by the organisers to operate a web-forum to facilitate dialogue in preparation for IYE and to monitor the impact of the event from 2001 to 2003, has carried on with its monitoring task, and has published its report on the state of global ecotourism five years on.³ One of the most useful outcomes of the Summit, however, was the wealth of information reported

on the state of ecotourism development in the different countries and regions of the world. The following trends are derived largely from the final report of the Quebec Summit (WTO, 2002), UNEP's report on IYE (WTO, 2003), on-going assessments made by Planeta.com, various ecotourism tourism websites and the literature on ecotourism.

North America

Ecotourism in North America developed against a backdrop of a vast, diverse and majestic natural landscape of mountain ranges, forests, waterfalls and rapids, and geological features, a large proportion of which was in pristine condition when the state intervened to protect areas for recreational and conservation purposes. Several individuals, notably Henry Thoreau (1817-1862), John Muir (1838-1914), Aldo Leopold (1887-1948) and Gifford Pinchot (1865-1946), championed initiatives for nature preservation or conservation and inculcated a love of nature through their writings and actions.⁴ Muir founded the Sierra Club and Leopold the Wilderness Society, which actively promoted nature preservation. Through the efforts of Pinchot, President Theodore Roosevelt established 53 wildlife reserves, 16 national monuments and five new national parks by 1901. There is therefore a well-established culture of visitations to nature/national parks and admiration of nature as the 'ultimate perfection'. In a 1994 survey of North American travellers, 77% revealed that they had taken vacations involving nature, outdoor adventure or learning about another culture in the countryside or wilderness. Of the remaining 23 percent, all but one percent expressed interest in nature-related vacations (Wright, 1996).

Stringent state regulation, supported by well-trained professionals and a strong research base, working in partnership with industry, created the conditions conducive to ecotourism development. Indeed, management systems founded in the USA and Canada are well-tested and have been used as a reference for many other national systems. There is strong reliance in North American ecotourism on technology to allow for large numbers of visitation while minimising impacts on the environment. The rapid economic growth after World War II also drastically changed the work-leisure balance such that many more people could afford to take vacations. Nature interpretation,⁵ where the most essential environmental messages are communicated emotionally by a variety of means, including as far as possible, an interactive participation by the visitor, is an important part of ecotourism. There are professional associations on Nature interpretation in Canada and USA, as well as an international journal, to serve and develop the industry.

Europe

In Europe, while mountainous regions are in relatively pristine state, much of the surrounding lowlands, however, have been culturally altered for over 3,000 years. Natural settings therefore almost always include inhabitants and local cultural products. Ecotourism in the Europe is therefore closely related to rural tourism. A feature of European ecotourism is place-specific products that reflect the character, history and culture unique to each place. They range from handicrafts, wines and food, and even natural mineral water. Development of ecotourism occurred largely as a consequence of changing economic conditions and cultural practices, and the rising concern for the environment and interest in natural history and culture. Ecotourism has been successful through the promotion of SMEs, including the Bed & Breakfast system in the UK and the *Gites de France* in France.

Another important factor underlying the successful development of Ecotourism in Europe is the widespread practice of public participation or consultation in landuse planning and management. This is a consequence of having diverse social groups occupying a relatively small area. In Europe, the notion of fairness is deeply rooted in the consciousness of the mass since the emergence of the working class in the late 19th Century and there is considerable support for 'pro-poor' tourism. The continent also benefits from having the largest potential outbound travellers close to rural/natural areas, therefore increasing frequency of visitations and scale of ecotourism. Like North America, Europe also has a large educated population base with environmental inclinations that has become more mobile in the past 50 years, with the ability to enjoy vacations. Similarly, nature interpretation is very much part of the ecotourism industry that is supported by professionals and associations.

Developing Regions

Southeast Asia, Africa and South America all possess an abundance of ecotourism assets. Unequal development and control of capital, however, have exacerbated inequality such that pronounced poverty coexists with rapid developments and wealth. Loss of indigenous land rights, exclusion of local communities in ecotourism ventures and 'green washing' are just some of the many ecotourism issues. In Southeast Asia, ecotourism has been associated with the alienation of the rights of local communities to the use of land and natural resources while major economic and political groups benefited. Indigenous communities, in particular, are poorly empowered and often do not participate in decision-making processes and rarely benefit from ecotourism.

Ecotourism development in developing nations is characterised by centrally planned projects, with strong influence from conservation NGO's. It is often highly dependent on funds from national or state budgets and from international donor agencies. While many ecotourism projects are essentially unsustainable, ecotourism has been relatively successful in acquiring political and financial support for the conservation of unique ecosystems and fauna. Examples include the Kenya "it stays because it pays" initiative and the Rwandan Mountain Gorillas. In some communities, ecotourism has engendered a sense of self-respect and re-ignited interests among the young generations in traditional cultures and practices. In Southeast Asia, ecotourism development has contributed towards research and monitoring to improve knowledge and management of natural assets in support of conservation efforts. In some developing countries, ecotourism is a significant foreign exchange earner, notably Costa Rica, Kenya and South Africa (Lawrence, 2005). However, it tends to be concentrated in specific areas and states of the country. Examples of emerging ecotourism hotspots with well-developed ecotourism infrastructure and practices include Sabah and Sarawak in Malaysia.

ECOTOURISM – DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES

TIES (1990)⁶ defined ecotourism as "responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the welfare of the local people". While this definition is widely used by planners and academics, to operators and many officials in developing countries, ecotourism is simply "travel to natural areas", i.e. no different from other forms of nature-based tourism, such as adventure tourism. The difference in perspectives and understanding of ecotourism among planners, authorities, operators, and tourists, is likely to have contributed to the different ways ecotourism has developed in different parts of the

world. Indeed, one of the objectives of the Quebec Summit was to arrive at a consensus of a more accurate definition of ecotourism. However, as the Summit was organised jointly by UNEP and WTO, and the Canadian Commission on Tourism (CTC) as host, the dominant perspective is that of ecotourism as a tool for sustainable development, particularly of the tourism industry, as articulated in Agenda21 endorsed at the Earth Summit in 1992. Oliver Hillel, UNEP's Tourism Programme Coordinator, elaborated on the concept, stressing that ecotourism ideally focuses on three basic aspects:

1. positive contribution to the conservation of sensitive ecosystems and protected areas, through financial and political support;
2. active participation from, and economic benefits to, local communities and indigenous people; and
3. environmental education of hosts, professionals and guests.⁷

Ecotourism thus defined appears to be a highly idealistic brand of tourism that is more concerned about fostering and propagating certain principles and values than about profits and economic growth. Advocates would argue that ecotourism views profits and growth in the long term, particularly gains bequeathed to our children and their children by means of nature and cultural conservation, which ultimately should ensure the survival of the human race. The high cost of developing and sustaining ecotourism today is viewed as an investment for the future. However, is there a market for such a product, especially if it costs more than its standard mass tourism counterparts? Interestingly, there appears to be a demand for such a high-principled product, particularly among travellers from advanced industrialised countries.

In a survey of US, British and Australian tourists, TIES (2004) reported that about 70 percent were willing to spend up to USD150 more for a 2-week stay in a hotel with a "responsible environmental attitude". Indeed, nearly 70 percent of US and Australian travellers and 90 percent of British travellers would choose hotels that are environmentally responsible. Similarly, about 58.5 million US travellers (38 percent) said they are willing to pay more to use travel companies that have policies and programs which protect and preserve the environment. Of these, 61percent say they would pay 5-10 percent more to use such companies. Another report revealed that tourists from US to Costa Rica were prepared to spend USD1,150 per visit on average for ecotourism (Courvisanos & Jain, 2000). While there is a paucity of data for Asia, a sizable proportion of Japanese, Hong Kong and Singaporean travellers appear to share similar demands, judging from personal observations and communications with tourists and industry experts.

Clearly, a market does exist, but what are its characteristics? Based on ecotourism organisations, such as TIES and EcoClub, and the literature (e.g. Williams, 1998), ecotourists appears to share similar educational background, which undoubtedly shape their worldview. The majority tend to be educated in developed countries, such as USA, Australia and Europe and the archetypal ecotourists are from the "baby boomer" generation from these regions. However, there are increasing numbers of younger ecotourists coming from Japan, Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Korea. In its ecotourism fact sheet, TIES reports that ecotourist demographic is between 40-60 years of age with roughly equal proportions of female and male. The majority of ecotourists are college educated (graduate and above) and often would have researched about their destinations before travelling. They tend to be assertive and critical about the quality of the ecotourism products or services offered by the ecotour agency, particularly when operators have international quality standards accreditation. The majority of ecotourists are from the

middle class with relatively high disposable incomes. These people do not mind spending more for an ecotourism package as long as it fits with their worldview and value system. While they tend to travel on cheap fares, they are willing to spend considerably more money on environmentally friendly and socially responsible hotels, travel packages or operators.

As the US and European baby boomer generation begins to retire from the workforce at the turn of the Century, ecotourism demand is expected to rise. This is the generation who have achieved a better quality lifestyle. They tend to earn and consume more goods than any previous generation. In the UK, baby boomers own 80 percent of the UK's wealth and consume 80 percent of all top branded cars, 80 percent of cruises and about 50 percent of skincare products (Walker, 2004). In addition, baby boomers have achieved the majority of their basic needs of food, shelter and clothing, and most seem to be seeking to fulfil the final stage in Maslow's hierarchy of needs, namely "self-actualization", which involves self-development and self-realisation (Maslow, 1954). Ecotourism appeals especially to baby boomers because at this stage of their lives, they feel as though they have a social obligation towards society and the natural environment (Sheth & Mittal, 2004).

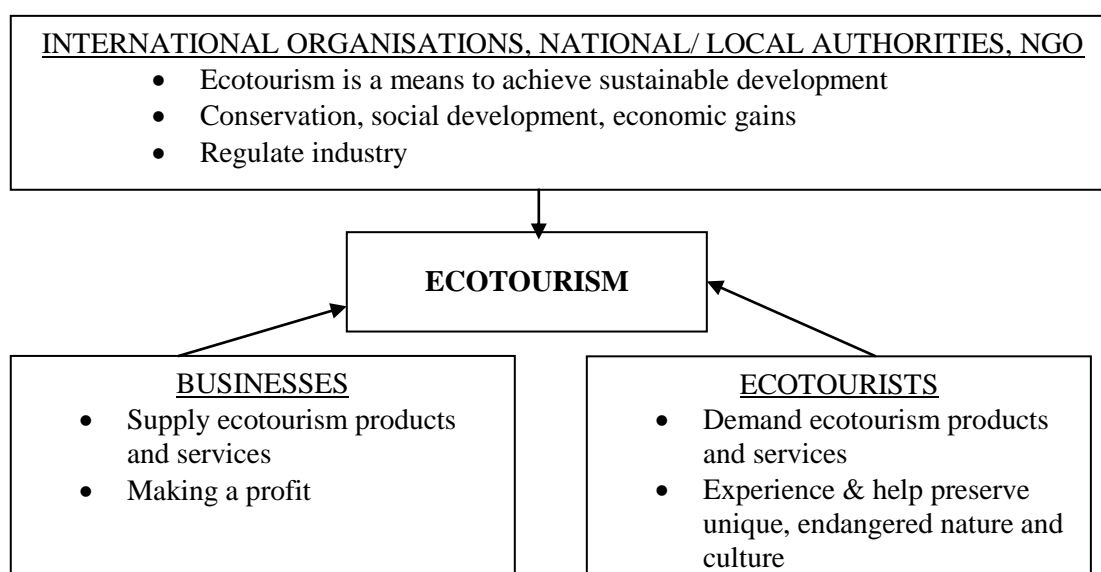


Figure 1: **Three Competing Players and their Priorities in Ecotourism**

However, if the sector is experiencing tremendous growth, why is it unsuccessful in many developing nations, where ecotourism still requires substantial funding because it cannot be sustained by market revenues? The uneven development could be due to the manner in which the main players compete in the ecotourism arena. Figure 1 shows three distinctive groups of 'players' in ecotourism and their priorities. First, international organisations, such as UNEP, UN WTO and TIES, and national governments see ecotourism as a way to steer development towards a sustainable path, or at least, towards sustainable tourism development, i.e. a tourism industry that meets the needs of the present generation without compromising future generation's ability to do the same (cf: WCED, 1987). Their priority is to protect natural areas, particularly unique habitats, and preserve indigenous cultures that are in danger of disappearing, as well as to ensure that indigenous communities that are often disadvantaged or marginalised receive an equitable share of the revenue from ecotourism.

Ecotourism businesses, which comprise hotels and eco-lodges, airlines, travel agencies, guides and supporting industries, make up the second group. The main priority of this group is to make a profit. This is their *raison d'être*. In the competitive market arena, lower operating costs, and hence, prices for products and services offered gives a business the edge. Market realities and resource constraints, however, determine the business' competitiveness. Consequently, it is unrealistic to expect businesses to incorporate environmental management and social development activities into their daily operation, when competitors in other sectors of the tourism market are not burdened by such responsibilities and can therefore offer nature-based services and products at more competitive prices.

The third group comprises the ecotourists. They drive the demand for ecotourism products and services that present nature in ways that evoke a mix of emotional imagination of nature that encompasses nature as magnificent, primal, raw, unadulterated beauty, a mother, fragile or threatened. Earlier perception of nature as 'wild and dangerous' gave way during the green revolution of the 1960s-1970s to it becoming the symbol of sustainability and raw beauty (see, e.g. Gruen & Jamieson, 1994; and Hannigan, 1995). While ecotourists do not want packaged natural products, which they reject as green washing, and crave authentic nature, nature-based products and services packaged in the ways they imagined nature is actually what they demand. In addition to a sense of having played a part in saving the environment, ecotourists also demand products and services that would make them feel like they have contributed towards making a better world for disadvantaged people and preserved their endangered traditions through their visit.

To understand ecotourism demand better, one has to understand that consumption does not occur purely in the material dimension in ecotourism. Referring to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, only the most basic consumption patterns occur in the material realm, i.e. people demand food and energy and other resources to satisfy hunger and survival needs. However, once the basic needs have been fulfilled, a person would have other non-materialistic demands, such as social acceptance, security, new experiences, and ultimately to "self-actualisation" (the need to discover the "self", "destiny", "purpose in life", and other spiritual quests). Ecotourism is consumption at the highest levels in Maslow's hierarchy of needs. While tourism satisfies the human need to discover and experience new environments, ecotourism satisfies mental and spiritual needs, in the form of symbols, knowledge, gestures and experience that convinces the person that he or she has conformed to sustainable development principles and acted for the good of humanity.

While ecotourism activities invariably involve low-impact activities (hiking, ballooning, biking or kayaking) in natural areas, ecotourists are however not necessarily adventurers that can rough it up or withstand, for example, being assailed by mosquitoes. According to ECOCLUB, hospitality should be comfortable enough for a western middle-income level standard of living. An 'eco-lodge', though basic, should be clean and furnished with the usual conveniences, preferably surrounded by nature and serve hearty meals with a local taste. Ecotourists normally do not want air-conditioning, but would seek one when the temperature gets unbearably hot. Ecolodges should ideally be designed to merge with the natural environment and use environmental technologies, such as solar heaters and solar lamps.

UNEVEN DEVELOPMENT

Notwithstanding the healthy growth of global ecotourism, its contribution to many developing countries' economy tends to be minor or negligible. According to TIES, by the turn of the new Millennium, only a third of the 350 ecolodges surveyed made a return on

their investment (Hillel, 2002). In fact, 90 percent of UNESCO's 250 natural World Heritage sites were used well below their carrying capacity and projections of 20 percent annual increases did not materialise. This was attributed to the attitudes of tourists toward any risks or discomfort, and having to pay for it. The report concluded that while many tourists like the idea of conservation, they are not willing to pay for it. Consequently, major global corporations are not presently interested in investing in ecotourism. Some professional and ethically committed developers are still trying to secure investment guarantees, grapple with widely differing management standards, work with a paucity of data, and cope with a dearth of professional capacity in destination areas.

Policies and commitment to facilitate business in natural areas, including infrastructures development, are likely to involve provision of subsidies, as businesses, especially small operators, are unlikely and unwilling to spend on technologies, training or education to provide low-impact travel to natural, especially ecologically sensitive or heritage, areas. Education is especially important given that ecotourism's high ideals are based on current knowledge of environmental science, environmental issues and sustainable development. It is therefore not surprising that, to date, many ecotourism operators continue to misunderstand ecotourism to be any visits to natural areas for leisure and recreational purposes. Similarly, policy makers, planners and regulators with inadequate knowledge of ecotourism, in particular its theoretical aspects, remain unaware of the barriers and constraints faced by businesses.

In addition, ecotourism in developing countries tends to be characterised by NGO intervention (or interference?). For example, a crucial component of ecotourism development is the active participation of the local, especially indigenous, community, in the planning, development and management of the tourism site. Such consultations, however, require representatives of the indigenous community to understand what is involved in tourism, its business aspects, and how to negotiate. Often, the community is coerced into believing particular slants of the situation by firms intending to operate in the area or by NGOs that have specific agendas that are more ideological than a sincere concern for the community's well being and priorities. In a study of NGO landscapes in Guatemala, Sundberg (1997) found that NGO's often interfered with the local socio-political structures and altered the local cultural landscapes by selecting and supporting local leaders that fit western ideals.

In contrast to circumstances in many developing countries, the three players in developed regions tend to be considerably more knowledgeable on the purpose and requirements for ecotourism development. This is probably because current concerns and researches began and were developed in these advanced industrialised countries, which have since the 1980's embarked on a program to remediate the damages caused by industrial society.

GLOBALIZATION AND ECOTOURISM

Globalization has created a new reality for human interaction, where a 'cyber' world co-exists with, and is coupled to, the physical world (Reynolds, 2002), radically altering the notions of space, place and indeed, geography (Graham, 1998). Globalization has shrunk the world and effectively bridged space-time barriers, which separate people and places primarily through the advancement, proliferation and use of information-communication technologies (ICT) and transport technologies, infrastructure and services globally. It has greatly enhanced communication and the flow of information and people, giving rise to an "information society", "knowledge-based" or "K" economy, highly mobile populations, and geopolitical dynamics driven by economic and ideological forces. In the words of Bill Gates (2000), communication in cyberspace has reached the "speed of thought". This has

led to the convergence of knowledge spheres, resulting in greater congruence in the understanding of the sustainable development concept by different disciplines and groups.

Convergence of knowledge has created greater awareness of the ecological linkages between development policies and practices, and environmental degradation and issues. It has also produced, and made visible, more efficient technologies that have smaller ecological footprints. It fostered interdisciplinary collaborations between researchers and the convening of international summits and global on-line forums to address global issues. While tourism is part and parcel of globalization, ecotourism very much part of the current ICT-driven globalization process, where information and knowledge shapes worldviews, trends and development. The main factors commonly associated with tourism are a person's ability, mobility and motivation to travel (see, e.g. Williams, 1998). Ability refers to whether a person has the means (e.g. money) and time (e.g. vacation) to travel. Mobility relates to the person's capacity to overcome the physical space-time barriers to reach a destination (e.g. access to transportation). Motivation is the force that pushes the person to travel. Several motivation theories exist, e.g. behavioural inversion (Graburn, 1983), social pull-push forces (Iso-Ahola, 1982) and Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Additionally, changes in the external environment also influence the potential tourist, including technological innovation, societal evolution and high-impact global events.

Globalization has accelerated technological innovation and diffusion, which enhanced human mobility and facilitated tourism, in turn, driving globalization, in a mutually reinforcing process. In the tourism industry, globalization has contributed to the diffusion and adoption of green and clean technologies and practices, and hence improved environmental responsibility and commitment in the business community, and greater environmental consciousness and support for sustainable tourism in the tourism market. And while the post-World War 2 economic boom has given the working class in Western Europe and North America the means and leisure time for travel, globalization has given increasing number of people around the world greater ability, mobility and motivation to visit areas that were previously inaccessible, and for some, the opportunity to effect change according to the ideals of their worldviews.

The tourism flow pattern, however, is also affected by high impact events, which either attract tourists or divert them from the area. For example, the Olympics would draw a large number of visitors to the area, but wars, famine and natural disasters would repel tourists. The global tourism flow, which registered only 25 million arrivals in 1950, had swelled to 760 million by 2004 and projected to reach 1.5 billion by 2020 (TIES, 2004). While flow rate and volume have increased tremendously since the turn of the century, the number of attracting and repelling areas has similarly proliferated, as countries try to engage the world's largest industry amidst an increasing uncertain future threatened by, amongst others, new strains of deadly viruses and terrorism.

Globalization undoubtedly has contributed to the rise in ecotourism by spreading the ecotourism imagination and hence, demand for nature-based products, through satellite-TV, green education and products, improved mobility, and people-to-people interaction. This growth in demand for ecotourism products and services is hardly surprising from a consumption perspective. Demand is what society wants or needs. Ecotourism demand has undoubtedly been shaped largely by social construction in a time when society, in the mobile, affluent and advanced industrialised world, is becoming increasingly concerned about the limits to economic growth and a real prospect of damaging the biosphere - humanity's life support system - beyond repair and threatening to end life as we know it.

Globalization has certainly made ecotourism destinations more visible. Individuals anywhere on the surface of the planet who are connected to the global information and knowledge networks can search for and access information on ecotourism destinations and services, and discuss with peers as well as operators with a presence in the World Wide

Web, the pros and cons associated with each destination. Globalization has fostered the adoption of environmental technologies, such as solar energy and composting toilets, so that greater number of visitors can venture into more remote, pristine and previously inaccessible areas in comfort and safety, with the knowledge that they are contributing to the preservation, rather than the degradation of the environment. Along with technology, globalization is regulating the development of the industry through global benchmarks and standards, such as Shores' (2002) 6-level scale to measure eco-integrity in ecotourism, TIES accreditation system and ECOCLUB's ecolodge awards.

WORKING WITH GLOBALIZATION

The regional differences in ecotourism development, admittedly, are considerably more complex in reality than described in this paper. Broad patterns are however useful for identifying key actors, events and circumstances in the ecotourism development story. In any ecotourism destination, there are at least four main stakeholders concerned with tourism development: (1) the local authority, (2) the business community, (3) the local indigenous community and (4) technical professionals and NGO experts. Their interaction within each destination, with its unique natural, political, legal-administrative, economic, technological and cultural environment, determines the characteristics of ecotourism at that particular destination. This occurs across the gamut of spatial scales (local, national and regional).

Ecotourism is a product of globalization, and any effective strategy for ecotourism development in countries that have not undergone the 'globulation' (Friedman, 2000) must realise this fact, if it hopes to develop this niche sector of the tourism industry and take advantage of circumstances created by globalization. This is because the digital divide created by globalization goes beyond the physical number-of-Internet-subscriber level, cutting deep into the psychological, social and cultural layers of the population. For example, presently globalization is giving developing countries greater visibility in the global tourism market through information posted on the Internet. However, some of the information is unflattering and some are inaccurate, as they reflect the opinions of people from a different culture, living condition and worldviews who, during their relatively short stay, misinterpret what they saw and experienced. This can impact ecotourism negatively by creating undesirable tourist expectations. Without integrating ICT and global knowledge networks into everyday life, developing countries will remain incapable of producing its own information packages and interact directly with the global ecotourism market.

Despite its pitfalls, globalization, however, offers these stakeholders the opportunity to integrate with the global knowledge network on ecotourism. In fact, this is inevitable as the knowledge and ICT networks will eventually reach even the most remote regions of the world. Once connected, authorities, businesses and local communities will become more aware and understand better the concepts, current best practices, established guidelines and international industry benchmarks and the technologies used in global ecotourism, as well as the expertise available for consultation, new business paradigms and global trends.

We propose four strategies, one relating to each of the key stakeholders in developing country ecotourism identified above: first, leverage on the expertise and connection of NGO and technical professionals to the global ecotourism knowledge networks; second, help businesses to understand that ecotourists are sophisticated consumers who are not satisfied with material consumption alone and are not easily duped into accepting staged events and cheap copies for the real thing; third, local communities need to be made to realise the value of their cultural heritage and environment; and finally, local authority

must adopt a more inclusive and responsive approach to planning and management for ecotourism development.

Strategy 1: Go global with the help of technical experts and NGOs

It is a fact that data, information, knowledge packages and networks are not readily available in most developing countries. If they exist, they may not be accessible or of such poor quality that they are of little use. Furthermore, they tend to have limited or restricted coverage. This is often due to out-moded policies on data security and sharing, and lack of funds and expertise for initial data capture, research and monitoring. However, many developing countries engage technical professionals as consultants, or cooperate with international NGO's. These groups have the necessary expertise to generate much needed data, information and knowledge on the country's ecotourism assets. Additionally, they tend to employ better (more efficient and effective) planning and management tools and procedures, which if adopted to replace existing out-dated systems⁸ currently still used, would help speed up development and direct it towards more appropriate, i.e. suitable for the unique circumstances of the destination, outcomes.

Finally, international NGO and technical professionals are part of knowledge networks, which drive and are continually being re-created by globalization. Associating with them and getting them to help promote the destination and its ecotourism characteristics would make the destination more visible to the global ecotourism market. This will also associate the destination with international benchmarks for ecotourism practice, product and service standards, and development trend, e.g. through certification. In its assessment of the impact of IYE 2002, WTO (2003) reported the event has helped raise awareness of and fostered collaboration on ecotourism and its technical aspects, including certification schemes, eco-labels, operational and assessment guidelines, and the development of national strategies.

In an interview with ECOCLUB, Eugenio Yunis, Head of Sustainable Development of Tourism, WTO, remarked that tourists are becoming more and more sensitive to the quality and conservation of environmental and cultural resources. Local tourism authorities, businesses and local communities must recognise networking with NGO and technical experts as an opportunity to enhance ecotourism development, as they would greatly benefit since most developing countries lack both expertise and access to global networks. Indeed, many technical professionals and NGOs in developing countries operate under restrictive conditions set by local authorities, and businesses and local communities are unaware of the benefits of engaging them.

Strategy 2: Understand ecotourism demands

For many developing countries ecotourism remains under developed because they lack a successful business component, as nature conservation is often the priority. Assistance for SME was discussed at the world summit at Quebec, but focussed more on building up SME capabilities rather than understanding the consumer. Successful businesses are those that supply consumers' demands. This strategy calls for investment into acquiring more knowledge and research on consumer behaviour.

People consume for different reasons. This depends largely on the consumer's "self concept". Consumers fix psychological expectations and symbolic meanings, e.g. to brand names of goods and services. In post-Fordist societies from where most ecotourists mainly hail, consumption choices are no longer solely based on functionality of the product but

encompass symbolic meanings (e.g. Belk, 1995). Elliot (1997) differentiated between two functions of symbolic meanings to serve an (a) “outer public self” or simply, (b) the “self”. Wong and Ahuvia (1998) echoed this view, linking social symbolism to interdependent self concept whereby consumers maintain a certain social role and persona to be presented to others, while self symbolism evokes emotions, impulses, memories, personal values and desires in the person upon consumption. According to Ricoeur’s (1985) Narrative Identity Theory a consumer reveals a narrative of his/her self or identity by the type of goods and services consumed.

Therefore, one ought to be able to understand ecotourism consumers from the things and kind or brand of services they seek. Whether motivated by the self or outer public self, there will be opportunity for business if consumer demands are well understood. For example, some ecotourists participate in ecotourism trips because of social influence or even coercion to save a particular habitat or wildlife, while others may be motivated by the self beliefs that they are participating in something noble and worthwhile. Consumers’ emotions and moods are stimulated through consumption of goods (Sheth & Mittal, 2004). As tourism becomes increasingly popular, more and more landscapes and cultures are being commoditised for consumption. In ecotourism, tourists consume pristine natural landscape visually, through interaction and tangible artefacts with meaningful symbolic expressions (e.g. ancient, raw, living, endangered, magnificent, etc.) that also invoke a blend of emotional responses. This explains why souvenirs are such an integral part of the tour experience. Stores selling ecotourism goods and services create an idealised setting that stage restoration of lost innocence through the redemptive powers of commodities (Goss, 1999). The mass media, particularly movies, have a strong influence on consumers’ emotions, e.g. to visit places where filming was done. Being in such places and gazing on such aesthetic landscape allows the consumer to evoke a sense of fantasy.

The professional working class, particularly retiring baby boomers, form the majority of ecotourists who seek meaning, wellness or spirituality from ‘mother nature’. While the ecotourism market is found mainly in the developed regions, smaller groups of ecotourists are also found in developing countries. There is therefore a local market for domestic ecotourism or eco-excursion, provided the right kind of products and services are offered, such as:

- a) products and services symbolic of nature protection and preservation;
- b) products and services that inculcate love of nature through an education program or package;
- c) products and services that demonstrate involvement of, and concern for, local indigenous community as the rightful host of the place; and
- d) activities that employ environmental technology to bring more people to experience pristine nature with minimal environmental footprint, discomfort and risk.

Globalization has changed the market place, creating a new dimension in cyber space, where supply meets demand through “business to consumer” (“B2C”) networks, where packaged information strongly influence sales.

Strategy 3: Value natural and cultural heritage

The Quebec Declaration emphasised the importance and need to include local indigenous communities in the decision-making process of ecotourism development, and that their rights be given priority. However, once included, representatives of local communities seldom know how to contribute effectively to ecotourism development, as they are

unfamiliar with the process and concept of ecotourism or its developmental process. Globalization may have also altered their way of life, hence cultural and traditional practices and values. Indigenous or local communities or their representative tend to under-value their cultural heritage, largely because they are unfamiliar with the way cultural artefacts are priced in developed countries. Where indigenous communities exist in an ecotourism destination, it would greatly aid in the destination's development if the community can be made aware of the value of their cultural heritage, so that different aspects can be commodified and packaged for consumption because there is a demand, especially for endangered, ancient cultures that depict living in harmony with nature. Care must be taken, however, to ensure that indigenous communities are not exploited in the process.

Indigenous communities however do not have the acumen to run businesses, design or price products to meet the demands of sophisticated ecotourists. Here, with the help of technical experts, businesses can collaborate with indigenous groups to develop products, e.g. souvenirs that capture the essence of their tradition and cultures, and services, e.g. classes on traditional dance, handcrafts and food processing, as well as operate tours where visitors can participate in daily cultural activities.

Strategy 4: Develop in a coordinated and adaptive manner

Local authorities in many developing countries tend to slow down business and tourism development due administrative red tapes and inefficient public service. Typically, officials are not well versed in the relevant legislation or the ecotourism concept; and do not have the necessary resources to support enforcement. Regulatory regimes tend to restrict, rather than enable social-economic activities. As mentioned above, ecotourism is an outcome of globalization, and therefore, its success requires local structures and conditions to be integrated within global systems. Globalization structures foster and facilitate communication and data exchanges among all stakeholders. To take advantage of globalization, regulatory policies must become more inclusive and enabling and regulatory structures more flexible to be responsive to dynamic changes in the local destination and global market.

The local tourism authority must take the lead in bringing together technical experts, businesses and local communities to develop the products and services demanded by ecotourists, while ensuring that development does not impact negatively on the environment. This is because for ecotourism businesses to be viable, the economy of scale must be increased. While large number of visitors to pristine natural areas usually results in environmental degradation, practices in many developed countries showed that this is not always the case. Environmental impacts can be averted through the application of sound environmental knowledge, management practices and environmental technologies. The bonus that comes with the use of low-energy, low-waste and recycling technologies is that they enhance the environmental image of the business or destination, as well as result in lower operating costs. Businesses, local communities and technical experts and NGO should be brought together and connected to global networks if sustainable ecotourism is to be achieved in developing countries. The call for national authorities to facilitate technical support to businesses was a key IYE recommendation (WTO, 2003).

STRATEGY FOR BRUNEI DARUSSALAM ECOTOURISM

Brunei Darussalam is a small country in terms of population size (383,000 – 2005 estimate (JPKE, 2006)) and land area (5,765 km²). Although development since the 1960's has been rapid, nearly 75 percent of the country is still forested, about half of which is in

relative pristine state. Sharing with the rest of Borneo Island the same ancient rainforest and with the wider Indo-Pacific region, a highly productive marine ecosystem, Brunei certainly has the right resources for ecotourism development. It is located in one of the main biodiversity hotspots in the world. In the late 1990's, when Brunei adopted a policy to diversify its economy away from dependency on oil and gas, ecotourism was seen as a leading contender for economic development. To date, however, ecotourism has remained underdeveloped, with only one commercial eco-lodge operating at the Batu Apoi National Park in Temburong and annual visitor numbers only in the hundreds. Since the establishment of a Tourism Board on 11 July 2005, there has been progress in tourism development, and the country is currently committed to the Heart of Borneo, a World Wildlife Fund (WWF) initiative aimed at assisting Brunei, Indonesia and Malaysia preserve a 220,000-km² contiguous area of pristine equatorial rainforest on Borneo Island.

As an ecotourism destination, Brunei Darussalam remains largely invisible in the global ecotourism market. By leveraging on Borneo tourism, tourist arrivals, notably from Japan, Korea and China, have increased over the past two years. However, to date, there is a dearth of information on Brunei and its ecotourism attractions. None of its operators are listed in global ecotourism networks. None of the operators that have web presence posted information that would present them as responsible ecotourism service providers. In contrast, ecotourism in the neighbouring Malaysia states of Sabah and Sarawak is well developed with strong web presence, wide variety of ecotours and attractions, and a wealth of knowledge and artefact products and services. The Sukau Rainforest Ecolodge in Sarawak has won several awards and its managing director, Albert Teo, has become a well sought-after speaker for ecotourism.

However, would the strategies proposed in this paper work for Brunei Darussalam? The country presently lacks technical expertise, well-developed ecotourism products and services, and visibility in the global ecotourism market, because it has not awakened to the realities of globalization. It is therefore not surprising that ecotourism has remained underdeveloped. Additionally, Brunei's laws predate environmental governance and have remained largely unchanged since the times when it was a British Protectorate (Tobin, 1992). Development has therefore tended to follow the pre-sustainable development, pre-globalization industrial model, with little connection to environmental management or the global K-economy. Presently, ecotourism is essentially nature tourism, where the approach taken by planners, authorities and operators is to capture some of the Borneo nature tourism market using its large area of pristine rainforest as the selling point. There is hardly any use of the more sophisticated marketing concepts used in global ecotourism, such as:

- nature as a way to wholesome lifestyles;
- nature as an escape to a romantic experience;
- nature as solace and journey;
- nature as a classroom;
- nature as a refuge for nurturing and bonding; and
- nature as a research laboratory.

There is also no regulatory or management policy or practice to guarantee customer's satisfaction or safety, or awareness of ecotourists' demand for authentic products and high quality (particularly ethical and knowledgeable) services.

The strategies proposed would help bridge the large gaps between (a) Brunei and the global ecotourism market place; (b) planners, regulators, operators, local communities and technical experts and interested NGO's; (c) conservationists, local communities and business developers; and (d) knowledge of Brunei's natural environment and that of the region (especially Borneo). This however is contingent on the authorities taking the lead

role in bringing together the various stakeholders. While progress has been slow, the establishment of the Tourism Board, led by an energetic leader, is making slow but sure strides towards integration and paving the way to connection with global ecotourism knowledge networks. The country's current commitment to WWF's Heart of Borneo project bodes provides an opportunity to implement the proposed strategies. The process is likely to entail considerable academic involvement, which is critical as ecotourism is very much driven by knowledge and packaged information, a hallmark of the globalization paradigm.

CONCLUSION

The UN, national governments and conservation groups see ecotourism as a means to achieve sustainable development. It is nature tourism but with responsibilities for nature conservation and social development. Such high-principled business however can be successful only where the circumstances are right. Ecotourism is an emerging sector in the global tourism, outpacing the rest of the industry by three times. This is due to a growing base of ecotourists with spending power and belief in the preservation of nature, especially critical habitats and endangered wildlife, for the good of the planet and humanity, and with helping marginalised indigenous communities improve their living conditions while preserving traditions and cultures. Growth however is uneven. Many developed countries in regions with large market bases and supported by good amenities, technical support and infrastructure, such as North America, Europe and Australia-New Zealand, are gaining from ecotourism while many developing countries are still losing from it. The main problems in developing countries appear to be a lack of infrastructure, coordination, technical capability, investment, and alignment with the global ecotourism industry. Ecotourism in developing countries is characterised by a reliance on funds mainly for nature conservation, and in places where ecotourism is the mainstay of economy, large leakage occurs because of foreign ownership.

The paper argues that the uneven development is caused by the emerging realities associated with globalization. As ecotourism is very much a product of the current ICT-driven phase of globalization, countries that are fully integrated into the global knowledge-based economy would gain with the growth of the industry. Developing country ecotourism tends to ignore the business aspect of ecotourism in favour of nature conservation. There are increasing number of areas within developing countries, such as Sabah and Sarawak in Malaysia, where development has incorporated business and community priorities into conservation programmes. The paper identified four important stakeholder groups, comprising tourism authority, businesses, local/indigenous communities and technical professional and NGOs, which must be brought together if ecotourism is to develop. It proposes four strategies for developing countries where ecotourism is still under developed, namely:

1. Engage international NGO and technical expertise to (a) generate much needed information to enhance the ecotourism knowledge base, products and services; and (b) increase visibility of the destination through association with their global knowledge networks.
2. Work with experts to develop products and services that reflect the natural, cultural and historical uniqueness of the destination to meet the demands of the sophisticated ecotourism market.
3. Help local and indigenous communities to value their heritage and commoditise them for the market while safeguarding the communities against exploitation.

4. Bring together technical experts, businesses and local communities to plan, develop products and services, and develop infrastructure to facilitate ecotourism at destination sites with the local tourism authority taking the lead.

It is argued that ecotourism has remained under developed in Brunei Darussalam largely due to its weak integration in the global K-economy and alignment with globalization. However, if Brunei were to implement the strategies by fully engaging international NGO and technical experts and associating with global knowledge networks; develop the necessary capacity for ecotourism management, e.g. use of green technologies; adopt consumer-orientated product design; and, educate all key stakeholders on the concept and management of ecotourism, it could join other developing countries that have begun to tap into and drawn benefits from the fast-growing global ecotourism economy.

END NOTES

- ¹ Interview with Eugenio Yunis, Head of Sustainable Development of Tourism, UN WTO, ECOCLUB, International Ecotourism Monthly, Issue 83
- ² WTO homepage news
- ³ Available on-line at <http://www.planeta.com/ecotravel/tour/yearya.html>
- ⁴ Conservation Chronology, available on-line: memory.loc.gov/ammem/amrvhtml
- ⁵ For more information, visit the Nature Interpretation (NI) association websites for USA (www.interpnet.com) and Canada (<http://www.interpcan.ca>). There are also NI associations in Europe and Australia.
- ⁶ TIES Ecotourism factsheet
- ⁷ Hillel, O. Ecotourism as a Tool for Sustainable Development, published 18 March 2002; article extracted from WTO/UNEP websites pertaining to the web-based conference (April 1-16, 2002) hosted by WTO and UNEP, and moderated by Ron Mader or Planeta.com
- ⁸ Many developing countries still operate using the archaic systems installed during the colonial period

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