

Ecotourism – an unsustainable delusion

by Anita Pleumarom

Since the 1980s, coinciding with the shift to the “sustainable development” paradigm, the notion of a new, benign tourism has become firmly incorporated into the fabric of mainstream tourism discourse. Ecotourism and other forms of tourism dubbed as green, sustainable, responsible, low-impact, etc. have been promoted enthusiastically as the solution to undesirable high-impact mass tourism.

Ecotourism attracted increasing attention and developed into a lucrative industry in the 1990s as it catered to the interests and lifestyles of the new Western middle classes that characteristically claimed environmental and cultural sensitivity and strived for “authentic” and “sensory-filled” nature-based holiday experiences. Today, visits to natural areas are estimated to account for 50 per cent of all leisure travel.¹

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”.² However, ecotourism is fraught with romantic and delusional beliefs.

Despite extensive debate for almost three decades, ecotourism – like sustainable tourism – remains floating in a “muddy pool”³ as the concept is vague and ambiguous, with definitions and interpretations to suit everyone and every worldview. There is also a huge gap between rhetoric and reality. Advocates usually emphasize the *potential* of ecotourism as a sustainable way forward, while they generally avoid an examination of the actual multi-dimensional impacts of ecotourism. As their case studies invariably focus on the

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successes of small-scale ecotourism projects, critics have suggested that ecotourism at best represents a “micro solution to what is essentially a macro problem”.⁴ At the centre of concern are “best practices”, whereas the political and economic structures that cause environmental and cultural degradation, economic inequality and social injustice are persistently ignored.

When the United Nations proclaimed 2002 as the International Year of Ecotourism (IYE), many civil society organizations and grassroots activists who had researched and monitored tourism development on the ground vigorously dissented and warned that the UN endorsement of ecotourism was likely to cause more harm than good. In a number of statements and letters to then UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan and the co-organizing agencies of the IYE (the UN Environment Programme and the World Tourism Organization), they called for transforming the IYE into an International Year of *Reviewing* Ecotourism that would provide for an impartial and fundamental reassessment of the ecotourism concept and its practices by all concerned parties.⁵

Even though the UN IYE celebrations and events went ahead as initially planned, the civil society campaign stimulated significant research and public debate on the pitfalls of ecotourism, particularly in developing countries, and subsequently, ecotourism lost much of its glamour. This is, for example, reflected in the Wikipedia entry on “Ecotourism”, which aptly addresses many of the criticisms.⁶

Economic benefits – more bane than boon

The mantra of tourism being an economic boon for poor countries and people is probably the greatest charade in mainstream

tourism discourse. Is tourism a solution or part of the problem in this ongoing global economic crisis that is coupled with rapidly deteriorating ecological conditions across the globe? The imminent danger of biosphere collapse and deepening inequalities threaten to consign billions of people to lives of permanent privation. Yet, the solution offered by the world’s leaders is more fiscal austerity, deregulation and continued unfettered economic growth while environmental and social safeguards are scaled back. Tourism is an integral part of this misguided development model.

Despite its professed noble intentions to generate revenue for both nature conservation and community development, the truth is that ecotourism – like *any* tourism that operates within the capitalist system – is a wealth extractor rather than a wealth creator. Tourism as a major source of “financial leakage” is well documented. Since it is frequently foreign tourism companies that control commercially successful projects, the domestic retention and distribution of benefits has an extremely poor record. In remote and scarcely developed countries and regions, leakages can amount to up to 90 per cent.⁷

Moreover, tourism has proven to be a real debt trap, particularly for developing countries that are already running trade and balance-of-payments deficits. Financial institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund have played a pivotal role in promoting conservation-plus-tourism schemes in debt-ridden nations as a way to boost and diversify their sources of foreign exchange earnings and to enable them to pay interest on foreign loans. But ironically, to establish ecotourism projects and related infrastructure to service the tourists, more substantial loans are needed and as a result, the already overwhelming financial burden of countries even increases. International banks

aim to capture the entire economic surplus of indebted countries in the form of debt service payments; that means all the tourism revenue is sucked out of the economy and siphoned off by foreign creditors.⁸

Conservation elusive

According to scientists, we are now experiencing the sixth mass extinction; the rate of loss of plant and animal species is presently greater than at any time in the history of the Earth. There are warnings that 50 per cent of the earth's species will vanish within 100 years and that such a dramatic and overwhelming mass extinction threatens the entire complex fabric of life. To blame are unsustainable economic activities, with ecotourism playing a major role.

To engage tourism businesses in nature conservation is highly problematic because for most of them, nature is little more than "the goose that lays the golden egg" and can be exploited for profit in a sustained way. As the major goal is to attract more tourists, a precautionary approach has rarely been applied. There is no empirical evidence that the principles of ecotourism – as outlined by TIES, for example – have been adopted by individual tourism businesses or the industry at large. Rather, what has been clearly observed over the last 20 years is that tourism companies have extensively taken advantage of ecotourism's popularity to "greenwash" themselves for self-serving purposes.

Even as globally environmental impacts of conventional mass tourism have continued to increase alarmingly, mass nature-based tourism – which is certainly a more appropriate term than ecotourism – has led to more, not less, environmental degradation and biodiversity loss.

Re-colonization

In fact, ecotourism is part of a major hegemonic project as it has opened up and usurped pristine areas around the world for industrial development, notwithstanding the considerable resistance of Indigenous Peoples who have inhabited these lands for generations. Many peoples and communities whose territories have been turned into playgrounds for ecotourists have seen their remaining patches of natural forest disappear, fragile marine, coastal, watershed areas and wetlands damaged and polluted, and wildlife harmed, because of a plethora of tourism-related development projects and rapidly expanding numbers of tourists.⁹

Commercial ecotourism is a highly consumer-centred activity mostly catering to an affluent clientele. The "gentrification of the wild" is well underway with high-end "eco"-resorts – often including hotels, holiday villas, spas, shopping centres and golf courses – established in national parks, wildlife sanctuaries and Indigenous Peoples' sacred lands. Such schemes often consist of artificial landscapes and tend to irretrievably wipe out plant and wildlife species, even entire ecosystems. In recent years, ultra-luxurious ecotourism has become the trend, featuring VIP "eco"-lodges, wildlife-watching and hunting safaris in Africa, or lavish getaways with marinas for super-yachts on private islands from Hawai'i and the Caribbean to Greece and the Maldives.¹⁰

The malady of privatization and financialization of nature

The neoliberal policies of deregulation, privatization and financialization of nature have worsened the situation. Natural resources are now regarded as "assets" to be privatized and sold off to investors and corporations. Partially responsible are international

development and financial agencies that support conservation-plus-tourism projects in return for reforms that allow the unrestricted plundering of resources, expansion of markets and cross-border capital flows. Insisting on self-regulation, the tourism and related “remote real estate” industries often operate against existing laws and rules with impunity, robbing local communities of their rights, resources and connections with their lands, environments and the wildlife they have sustained for generations.

A particular threat is the theft and trade in genetic materials by corporations which, often under the guise of ecotourism, obtain access to pristine areas high in biological diversity. “Biopiracy” has become commonplace and plays a significant role in the depletion and extinction of many species upon which local communities have depended for healing and food sources for generations. It generally requires little investment and yields enormous profits, while the risks in terms of discovery and penalty are low. In ecotourism, this illegal activity is facilitated by “nature interpretation” as it allows agents of multinational firms to gain knowledge of, steal and control genetically valuable flora and develop their own genetically modified organisms (GMOs).¹¹

Unsustainable tourist transport

Ecotourism strongly depends on fossil fuel-based transport to and from nature destinations and often features recreational activities such as offroad-driving, boating, jet-skiing as well as seaplane and helicopter tours, all of which cause serious harm to the environment and climate.

The idea of environmentally-minded tourists flying long distances in order to conserve biodiversity or sensitive ecosystems in a poor country is utterly delusional, given

that aviation is one of the worst climate-destroyers. Presently, airlines fly over three billion passengers every year — a figure that is heavily concentrated on a handful of frequent flyers based in the world’s richest countries. That number is expected to double by 2035. By 2050, it is estimated that emissions from civil aviation will rise by between 300 and 700 per cent, which could see them accounting for over 20 per cent of total global greenhouse gas emissions by that date.¹²

Also, the construction of transport-related infrastructure can have devastating consequences for local environments. For the sake of ecotourism, roads are cut through fragile plant and wildlife habitats; airports are built in the middle of rainforests and wetlands; and marinas and cruiseship terminals in mangrove forests and coral-rich coastal areas.

Aggression against Indigenous Peoples

Ecotourism is an industry that penetrates Indigenous Peoples’ ancestral lands and cultures to the core, often with devastating consequences.¹³ Despite much public outcry and protests, forced displacement and other human rights violations in the context of ecotourism continue to occur in many parts of the world.

In a remarkable article entitled “Ecotourism: Suicide or development?”, Ole Kamuaru, a Masai rights activist from Kenya, wrote: “For ecotourism to claim that it preserves and enhances local cultures is highly disingenuous. Ethnic groups are increasingly being seen as a major asset and ‘exotic’ backdrop to natural scenery and wildlife. The fact that these people are the target of exploitation and suppression by the dominant social groups in states has generally been ignored. There is rarely an acknowledgement – much less

support – of Indigenous People’s struggle for cultural survival, self-determination, freedom of cultural expression, rights to ancestral lands, and control over land use and resource management.”¹⁴

It is also alarming that small “community-based” ecotourism projects are often used as spearheads to take over Indigenous Peoples’ territories and pave the way not only for large-scale industrial tourism but for other controversial projects as well, such as mining, dam-building and bio-prospecting. Ecotourism is a highly deceptive affair for local people because it first creates the mirage of sustainability and prosperity, before depriving the people of control of their lands and their lives.

Conclusion

In the face of the worsening biosphere crisis coupled with increasing global economic instability, which is set to turn into a profound global humanitarian catastrophe, the promotion of ecotourism is totally unjustifiable. Ecotourism is an unsustainable delusion as it argues for biodiversity conservation and the well-being of communities but is based on the philosophy of unfettered economic growth and biodiversity as a profit centre.

Ecotourism schemes that involve land grabs and tend to commodify and financialize nature must be rejected. What needs to be protected is what is essential for people’s lives and livelihoods and what is regarded as sacred, precious and unique – not what can be turned into money to be pocketed by investors and corporations. Lands and natural resources that have been appropriated illegally or without the informed consent of resident people(s) for tourism and conservation purposes must be returned to the rightful owners and guardians. Proper safeguards must be put in place to prevent such development

aggression and rights abuses in future. The enhancement of biodiversity will best take place through recognizing and respecting Indigenous Peoples’ fundamental rights and their traditional knowledge, practices, customary institutions and governance.

Calls for “mainstreaming biodiversity” in tourism are meaningless as long as the underlying reality behind the failures of biodiversity protection is not adequately taken into account. Given the wide range of issues that need to be addressed in the context of neoliberal globalization, tourism and conservation policies must be made part of a wider political debate on how to transform global and national governance and economic frameworks in such a way that development – which may or may not include tourism – genuinely works for people(s), the environment and the climate.

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Notes

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