



The Ecotourism Paradox or What is Ecotourism - and what is not?

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*On behalf of Sedgefield
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I recently saw an advertisement for quadbike ecotourism, and honestly could not imagine how an experience with six or ten noisy quadbikes in a forest could be labelled 'ecotourism'.

Similarly, if one flies to an ecotourism destination, spends four to six hours each day in a vehicle observing wildlife, rushing from one animal sighting to the next after being notified over the radio, and later sits discussing that the experience whilst sipping expensive imported wine – one can only imagine the carbon footprint and environmental consequences of such activities!

It seems that the modern ecotourism landscape is increasingly dominated by luxury enterprises:- elegant lodges, boutique resorts, and nature-based retreats offering the comforts of premium hospitality, all in the name of ecotourism. Accommodations are often situated in remote, pristine environments, such as nature reserves, forests, or coastal regions. Facilities may include private lodges or

bungalows, gourmet organic cuisine, private wildlife excursions, and wellness offerings such as yoga and spa treatments.

Ecotourism aims to promote environmental conservation, yet often causes negative impacts such as habitat destruction or alteration, pollution, and social disruption. The evidence of human presence which alters animal behaviour is common, increasing their vulnerability and affecting their ability to evade predators or avoid poachers. These behavioural changes may lead to injuries, death, or displacement, disrupting ecosystems and threatening species survival.

Popular ecotourist destinations often lead to building new infrastructure for more visitors. Increased tourism puts pressure on local resources and the ecosystem. Socially it may displace indigenous groups or local communities from their land, preventing them from benefiting economically. Additionally, sacred rituals and cultural practices may be turned into spectacles for tourists, which is arguably simply exploitation of indigenous traditions for commercial gain.

A conservationist, Hector

Ceballos-Lascurain is credited with the first definition of ecotourism in 1987, “*tourism that consists of travelling to relatively undisturbed or uncontaminated natural areas with the specific object of studying, admiring and enjoying the scenery and its wild plants and animals, as well as any existing cultural manifestations (both past and present) found in these areas.*” The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) sees ecotourism as a significant tool for conservation, though it should not be seen as a fix-all when it comes to conservation challenges.

Sustainable ecotourism should be guided by three core principles: conservation, education, and community. Conservation is the key component of ecotourism because it offers long-term, sustainable solutions to enhancing and protecting biodiversity and nature. Marketing an ecosystem, species, or landscape to ecotourists helps create value, and that value can help raise funds to protect and conserve those natural resources.

The goal of ecotourism tours and companies must surely be to educate tourists about conservation efforts, offering them the chance to explore nature, while supporting local communities and conservation efforts. Yet beneath its green image often lies a more complex and often troubling reality:- poorly managed ecotourism can inflict more harm than good, undermining the very ideals it seeks to uphold.

While ecotourism has the potential to foster environmental conservation and awareness, it is essential to recognise and address its negative impacts. Sustainable practices, strict regulations, and community involvement are crucial to ensuring that ecotourism fulfils its promise of protecting the environment and supporting local communities without causing harm. By understanding these challenges, participants can work towards a more responsible and effective approach to ecotourism.

As an industry that relies heavily on the presentation of eco-friendly components to attract customers, ecotourism has the inevitable potential as a means for greenwashing. Just as corporations may falsely brand themselves as environmentally friendly or socially responsible to appeal to conscious consumers, ecotourism companies often mask exploitative or unsustainable practices behind the veneer of conservation. Noble intentions often become distorted, and the 'eco' prefix amounts to little more than a greenwashing rebrand.

When planning your ecotourism trip, do research on the organisation to ensure they genuinely benefit the environment rather than exploit it. Certifications can help travellers identify responsible options. Thoroughly check the credentials, practices, and ethics of ecotourism operators to make sure your travel choices support conservation, help local communities, and minimise harm. However, if your operator's main goal is economic growth it cannot truly be “eco.” Ecotourism should be seen as a conservation tool, not a means for unchecked commercial expansion.