

## Ecotourism vs. Sustainable Tourism

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### *Abstract*

*This essay gives definition to sustainable tourism and ecotourism. It also includes an outline for the difference between the two. Geographic examples given include Kenya, Mt. Everest, Iceland, and Los Angeles. Through a political ecology lens, it analyzes both forms of tourism and provides evidence to why sustainable tourism should be pursued over ecotourism. As tourism is a driving force in the global economy, stakeholders, such as the local communities, must be given the highest consideration; and as consumers, we must make choices that provide the most positive impact.*

“Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness, and many of our people need it sorely on these accounts. Broad, wholesome, charitable views of men and things cannot be acquired by vegetating in one little corner of the earth all one's lifetime” (Twain 1984). Travel is something sought after by millions. In 2016 alone, 18,676,547 passports were issued in the United States according to the U.S. Department of State (“U.S. Passports Issued per Fiscal Year (1996-2016)”). Research conducted by the United States Travel Association reports that direct spending by residential and international travelers in the United States averaged \$31,400 per second. That same research also found that the U.S. travel industry supports an average of 15.3 million jobs (“U.S. Travel Answer Sheet” 2017). There are clear statistics that show tourism has an impact on not only the United States economy, but the global economy. The World Travel and Tourism Council estimates that 10.2% of the global gross domestic product (GDP) in 2016 was contributed from travel and tourism (WTTC 2017). Not only that, but tourism is one of the fastest growing sectors in the world economy, growing at a faster rate than the world GDP. For the year of 2016, the GDP growth for travel and tourism grew 3.3%, where the global GDP only grew 2.5%, according to Oxford Economics (Oxford 2017). With tourism having such a large impact on the global economy, other positive aspects of tourism should be taken into account. Out of this tourism and travel GDP, 10 – 15% is from ecotourism, the fastest growing sector, stated by the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO 2013). As the sector of sustainable tourism is one that is only gaining marginal attention, we will look here to give an overview in various global regions, rather than focusing on one specific area. This is to give an introduction of the topic and provide a structured understanding of the difference between ecotourism and sustainable tourism. Where ecotourism is beneficial in many areas, some, which we will address here, standards need to be pushed further. In order to make a long-lasting difference in regions economically, socially, and ecologically, sustainable tourism should be the sector pursued.

According to the International Ecotourism Society, ecotourism is defined as “responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people,

and involves interpretation and education" (TIES 2017). In many cases, ecotourism is praised as benefiting the local community, helping environmental conservation, and participating in cultural preservation. Kenya can be used as an example for the initiatives they have taken to protect wildlife, preserve land, reduce carbon, empower women, and provide education for environmental relief efforts (Global Ecotourism Network 2014). Collectively, these initiatives yielded a positive economic result. In the year 2014, a little over 9% of Kenya's whole economy employment was in tourism (UNWTO 2015). Economically, ecotourism can again be seen as a benefit to the local communities. In many cases, ecotourism has become popular in the developing world because of the promise it brings in the realm of revenue ("Benefits of Ecotourism in Preserving Environment" 2017). By focusing on wildlife and environmental sites, ecotourism can help to bring better appreciation to those places and species in general. In highlighting wild sites such as coral reefs, and big game reserves, it helps to give a push to conservation and the formation of national parks (Simm 2016). By also needing the environment for the tourism itself, it is a notion that helps protect said environment. If a nation allows for the environment to see total degradation, then that country will not have what was bringing in that economic benefit to begin with.

While numerous positive aspects of ecotourism exist, there are downfalls as well. Though we described above some of the environmental benefits, environmental degradation is actually a large concern in certain sites due to ecotourism. Let us focus again on Kenya; specifically, the impact that ecotourism has on some of the game reserves. Kenya is a place of desired travel because of their well-known photographic and tourist safaris that take place on their game reserves and national parks. However, due to the construction and accommodations that must be made for visitors, there are major concerns of degradation and pollution ("Sustainable Tourism Report" 2014). This includes solid and liquid waste generation that is occurring in locations without proper disposal sites. A negative impact on water quality and availability is another concern. Many lodges are in remote areas and rely on harvested or tapped water for the abundance of cooking, drinking, and cleaning that occurs in those locations ("Sustainable Tourism Report" 2014). In 2015 Kenya invested approximately 6.3% of their whole economy GDP to travel and tourism, showing significant effort into physical development (UNWTO 2015). Similarly, we can look at the environmental degradation that has happened on Mt. Everest. The hundreds of travelers that attempt to climb Mt. Everest have littered the mountain with debris and waste. Along with this issue comes exploitation of the surrounding region. Specifically the extraction of trees from forests, as hikers use said wood for fires (Mohammed 2017). When an area with as much notoriety as this is experiencing such degradation, it is evident that a negative relationship can exist between tourism and the environment.

Ecotourism holds a limited potential when it comes to wildlife conservation. Due to the structure of ecotourism, this strategy is unable to insure the long-term protection of environmental resources (Isaacs 2000). In many cases, there is not a strong, explicit stand for wildlife protection, which leaves the possibility for negative impact through human activities. Consequently, promoting ecotourism may actually distract from appropriate means of environmental protection (Isaacs 2000). This is not to say that all ecotourism is detrimental to the environment or conservation as a whole, because as described previously, there is clear evidence that states otherwise. While ecotourism can influence regions to be a bit more environmentally conscious for the benefit it brings them

economically, the bottom line, in most cases, is that ecotourism is a vacation you can feel good about taking, but maybe not a vacation that is making as positive of an impact as you think.

Ecotourism has plenty of examples that prove its benefit to the environment and cultural enlightenment; however, they do not and should not outweigh the negative impacts. For that reason, we should focus on the more beneficial type of tourism, sustainable tourism. The Center for Responsible Travel defines sustainable tourism as “tourism that leads to the management of all resources in such a way that economic, social, and aesthetic needs can be fulfilled while maintaining cultural integrity, essential ecological processes, biological diversity, and life support systems” (CREST 2016). One reason for a push in sustainable tourism is out of necessity. Tourism destinations that are quickly growing have no other choice then to be sustainable. By examining the international travel compared to the local population, analysts have a way of measuring the growth of tourism for a particular location. In Iceland for example, tourists arriving from international locations outnumbered the local residents 5.1 to 1 for the year 2016 (WTTC 2017). High influx rates such as these will cause strain on infrastructure capacity as well as environmental impacts. As more tourists come to a site, there needs to be accommodations for stay. As they travel through a location, transportation must be available. Overcrowding is a major result from tourism in an area that does not have the scope to allow such inpouring of people. These aspects if not properly handled can be the downsides of tourism in an area. Places will not see return visitors if those visitors did not have an optimal visit the first time round due to population control issues.

While it covers many of the same aspects, sustainable tourism is stricter than ecotourism. In much documentation, there seems to be a certain extent of interchangeability of ecotourism with sustainable tourism. This can be differentiated with the understanding of both terms as not all forms of ecotourism are sustainable and not every form of sustainable tourism takes place in natural areas. Ecotourism does indeed embrace some principles of sustainability, but it typically refers to tourism in natural areas, normally involving some form of interpretative experience of natural and cultural heritage, positively supporting conservation and indigenous communities, and usually organized for small groups (CREST 2016). Sustainable tourism on the other hand is increasingly highlighted as an important tool for promoting conservation in protected areas. The International Union for Conservation of Nature has shown that “increasing the number of visitors to protected areas can be an effective tool for enhancing stewardship, revenues and community development, provided well-functioning management systems are in place” (CREST 2016).

To claim these sites of sustainable tourism, there are a couple different organizations that provide assessments and awards to those that exceed the standards required to be considered sustainable. Green Destinations is an organization out of Europe that uses an assessment and reporting system to rank the top 100 sustainable destinations every year. For these assessments and reports, Green Destinations use seven criteria that are recognized by the Global Sustainable Tourism Council. These criteria listed: destination characteristics, destination management, nature, scenery and animals, environment and climate, culture and tradition, social well-being, and business and hospitality ("Assessment and Reporting Platform" 2016). Now for reference, one of the Top 100 Sustainable Destinations for 2017 is Los Angeles. It may seem surprising at first, but let's examine the reasoning. Los Angeles is the most culturally diverse city in the United States due to its residents coming from over 180 countries and speaking 140 languages. Los Angeles has also created a

“Sustainable City pLAN” as an initiative for creating an environmentally healthy, economically prosperous, and equal opportunistic city. This plan outlines both long and short term goals, remaining completely transparent in its metrics for measuring progress (Green Destinations 2016). This is just one of numerous examples that showcase a site that isn’t of the “nature-tourism” variety, but remains being seen as a site for sustainable tourism.

Another differing factor of ecotourism and sustainable tourism is this idea of collaboration. A 2012 study by the Travel Foundation states regarding “the overall issue of who is responsible for protecting the destination as a tourism product, a more holistic approach is now emerging – the idea of destination partnerships” (CREST 2016). Rather than any one party being responsible for protecting a destination, this is a multi-stakeholder approach whereby all parties interested in a destination as a resource look at how they can work together to achieve a common goal of sustainability. These parties may include national governments, local governments, local non-government communities, non-profits, or even businesses. To further exemplify this idea, the United Nations Sustainable Development Summit formally adopted 17 Sustainable Development Goals in 2015. This became the first instance where the tourism industry has been included in the plan as a means to end extreme poverty, fight inequality and injustice, and tackle climate change (“UN Sustainable Development Goals” 2017). Giulia Carbone, Deputy Director of Global Business and Biodiversity Program for the International Union for Conservation of Nature, believes that “with international travel expected to rise, protected areas are likely to come under increasing pressure from tourism” (CREST 2016). With the help of implementations such as the Sustainable Development Goals, managing the impacts from tourists as well as provide conservation opportunities, will secure long-term protection for critical and fragile areas. To be most successful economically, stakeholders must be involved in the process. In order to do this, first the determination of who the stakeholders are must be undertaken. Then it should be asked, how planners and developers should involve those stakeholders in the development of sustainable tourism. It is a requirement of rethinking the top down decision-making process of “experts” making all the decisions. In order to authentically be sustainable, local communities must be involved so their interests and opinions are heard and taken into consideration (Global Ecotourism Network 2014).

If we are privileged enough, there will be moments to travel and see other cultures and landscapes. If we are opportunistic enough, those moments will be taken advantage of. If we are aware enough, we will choose carefully which tourism activities we partake in. Jane Goodall said, “You cannot get through a single day without having an impact on the world around you. What you do makes a difference and you have to decide what kind of difference you want to make” (Goodall). As a consumer, the choices that are made daily have a greater impact on the environment and economy than may be perceived. The interconnectivity of such systems is seemingly invisible, but highly manipulative. To gain the knowledge to recognize ecotourism, but to have the ability to choose sustainable tourism is powerful. As tourism is such a large impact to the global economy, an aspect that is growing more every year, we have a responsibility to analyze how we can make such an influence a positive one.

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