



Final Project - CRP 3840, Fall 09



Jacob Pinsof and Zied Sanhaji chose to bring you all the way to South Africa to explore the wonders and intricacies of ecotourism. Enjoy the ride.

Ecotourism South Africa



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Introduction

"The typical baby boomer has done Hawaii and the resort in Jamaica and they realize something is missing" (Mark Wilson, Travel Consultant). Over the past six years people have developed a new taste for the type of vacation they desire. Many Americans have gotten tired of the typical leisure vacations and shown interest in a more meaningful experience while on vacation. In order to accommodate this new demand, the hospitality industry has developed a new form of tourism: ecotourism. The paper will discuss ecotourism on a global scale and will take a closer look at South Africa. Furthermore, the paper presents two case studies of Eco-lodges that take two different approaches to ecotourism.

What is Ecotourism?

Today Ecotourism is defined as, "responsible travel to fragile, pristine, and usually protected areas that strives to be low impact and small scale. It helps educate the traveler; provides funds for conservation; directly benefits the economic development and political empowerment of local communities; and fosters respect for different cultures and for human rights.¹" Furthermore, ecotourism promises the traveler an opportunity to help preserve the planet while getting a nice tan at the same time. Ecotourism has given birth to kinder and greener tourists who are interested in sustainable travel, which protects both environment and culture.

The popularity of Ecotourism has drastically increased within the past few years. International Ecotourism Society claims that, "the market in 2004 for worldwide ecotourism and nature tourism were going three times faster than the tourism industry as a whole." Additionally, the Society claimed that more than 55 million Americans would like to book a vacation that incorporates sustainable travel. The additional draw for ecotourism is that it allows the traveler to gain access to destinations they wouldn't be able to discover otherwise. Indeed, as exotic destinations become more common place, travelers seek out more unusual and broadening experiences.

Sustainable tourism could grow, "25% of the world's travel market within six years²", this increase would generate \$46 billion dollars on a global scale. Furthermore, there is global consumer demand for ecotourism. In a recent study by the Ecotourism Society, "more than two-thirds of U.S. and Australian travelers, and 90% of British tourists, consider active protection of the environment and support of local communities to be part of a hotel's responsibility.³"

And the Ecotourist? Who is he/she?

As ecotourism evolved through the years, the birth of the ecotourist emerged. The ecotourist has established generally preferences when traveling and the hospitality industry has been continually adapting to the needs of the ecotourist. Duane Silverstein, Director of Seacology, explains, "these people are looking for two things: access to unique areas that most tourists can never visit, and a way to improve the quality of life of the people and the places they visit."⁴ Ecotourists want to feel that they are experiencing a foreign culture and have opportunity to contribute to a benefit of greater good. "People selfishly want experiences that are real- they don't want canned tours, they want to meet the park ranger, they want to help in an orphanage." Additionally Mr. Magruder, director of public affairs at Earthwatch, notes, "An increasing number of people want their time on the planet to count."⁵ Ecotourists are willing to drop significant money on a trip in order to fulfill a desire that they made an impact on someone life and was able to broaden their horizon by being exposed to foreign cultures.

What role do Ecotourism operator themes play?

Regardless of the location, operators who promote ecotourism have similar offerings that consistent across the globe. Many operators emphasize environmental education where travelers learn about how to preserve land and natural resources. Additionally many operators are based out of a small, regionally owned lodge as opposed to huge hotels or resorts owned by large corporations. Ecotourism operators also hire local people as guides, as no one can really interpret their country better than a local native. With recent demand for Ecotourism, many travelers across the globe are looking for ecotourism destinations which ultimately benefit many aspects of the region. Benefits appear in the threefold scope selected to give a fair assessment of ecotourism: economic, environmental, equity.



1 Honey, Martha: International Ecotourism Society

2 TIES Global Ecotourism Fact Sheet, updated in 2006, published on www.ecotourism.org

3 Ibid

4 Article New York Times: "Ecotourism can it protect the planet?"

5 Ibid

What are the benefits of Ecotourism?

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Economic

Across South Africa, tourism is exploding and is the fastest growing part of the economy. Today, ecotourism is the major type of tourism that consists in South Africa. A major economic benefit that ecotourism brings to South Africa is the potential to alleviate poverty in South Africa through bringing money into the economy and creating job. "With tourism growing, now is a great opportunity to capitalize on eco-tourism to ensure that the people living in the areas being visited, are benefiting from the economic growth. Instead of just tourism where the local people's voices are not heard, it is essential for eco-tourism to be utilized through including the local people."¹ Each year, South Africa generates approximately \$62 billion rand a year (\$8.4 billion USD). A portion of the money brought in by ecotourism goes directly into the communities where the hotel/lodges are located which helps reduce poverty and brings higher paying jobs to the locals. Furthermore, ecotourism in South Africa creates over 5,000 jobs for the local area.

Ecotourism benefits the local economy substantially more than the typical "mass" tourism. "80% of money for all-inclusive package tours goes to airlines, hotels, and other international companies."² Unlike typical hotels and resorts funded by mass tourism, eco-lodges funded by ecotourism, hire and purchase locally and put as much as 95% of money into the local economy. Furthermore, visitors who are part participating in ecotourism spend more money than visitors who broadly categorized as mass tourism. "The daily expenditure of cultural tourists (US \$90) is higher than visitors on a touring holiday (US \$52), beach holiday (US \$62) or city break (US \$54)."³

Another of ecotourism's economic benefit is the consequential development of the country's infrastructure bringing enhanced roads, hospitals, medical clinics, and education to isolated areas. Most often, ecotourism tends to be established in relatively remote locations away from main urbanized areas. Thus, by its sheer physical situation, eco-tourism contributes to enhancing people's lifestyle in remote areas where they do not have access to modern medicine and education.

Equity

Ecotourism provides isolated locals with the opportunity to interact with people of diverse backgrounds and socioeconomic groups, which without ecotourism they would rarely encounter such a diverse human interaction. Since many eco-lodges are located in remote areas, the natives living in these remote destinations that would be otherwise untouched by mainstream people, are now be visited due to ecotourism.

Environmental

Ecotourism in South Africa can be a powerful conservation tool, one in which encourages people to maintain and protect the natural environment. As Richard Reyel, President of International Expenditures, puts it: "By enabling people to see the world's fragile regions first hand, conservation groups say they are more effective in promoting their causes."⁴ "Due to the economic benefits of ecotourism, the South Africans have an incentive to protect their environment. For example, since tourism is such a commodity, both the government has increased its anti-poaching effort due to tourist's demands of wanting to see wildlife roam by their lodge. According to the World Bank, each lion in Africa accounts for \$27,000 in revenue. Thus, it is more feasible to protect the animals for tourism purposes, than to kill and sell the animal. Elizabeth Boo claims, "Ecotourism is one way local people can make money off natural resources while protecting them."⁵

Ecotourism in Mexico encourages local residents in the Yucatan Peninsula to forgo their destructive practices in place of more environmentally sound ones. For example, local residents in Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula used to brutally slaughter sea turtles in order to sell the turtle shells to tourists. Due to recent fluctuation of ecotourism, locals now preserve the turtles to visitors can pay to see them. Similarly, in Belize, locals created a sanctuary for rare howler monkeys, in which they built for tourists to observe. Locals in Belize have also built the world's only Jaguar preserve, which brings in thousands of visitors each year.

¹ <http://www.tourismroi.com>

² Mintel Report

³ Ibid

⁴ Article New York Times: "Ecotourism can it protect the planet?"

⁵ World Wildlife Fund - <http://www.worldwildlife.org/>

What are the drawbacks of Ecotourism?

While nature tourism is growing at a yearly rate of 20% and continues to convert an increasing number of travelers to sustainable tourism, ecotourism is expected to take up to a fourth of the world's travel market by 2013. As shown by the United Nations Environment Program and International Conservation, much of this growth is fueled by a rapid expansion over the world's few remaining natural areas¹. How can one sustain such drastically high levels of growth and development without shocking the fragile ecosystems around the globe?

Many argue that ecotourism is, ironically enough, a threat to what it strives to achieve: the evolution of host communities, cultures and economies at minimal cost to the environment. Others such as Mr. Auden Schendler, author of "Getting Green Done: Hard Truths from the Front Lines of the Sustainability Revolution" recently quoted in the New York Times, go as far as saying that the term 'sustainable tourism' simply is an oxymoron².

Rather than judging the legitimacy of ecotourism, this report attempts to deliver a fair depiction of ecotourism. In order to do so, some essential drawbacks of ecotourism will be explored following the same aforementioned 3-part framework (i.e. Environment, Economic, and Equity).

Environment

Ecotourism destinations tend to display aesthetically pleasing yet extremely delicate and unique environments. Though raising awareness is part of ecotourism's fundamental principles, many foreign travelers remain unaware of the consequences that their sheer presence may impose on the newly discovered landscapes. While most local populations cautiously use their environment to allay their daily struggle to subsist, visiting foreigners often carry similar standards of living as the ones in their home country and take their heavy uses of resources for granted.

Coupled with intensifying traffic of travelers, such behavior places considerable stress upon the visited sites and will eventually further the deterioration of natural habitats. Factors inducing such risk of environmental degradation may also include means of access to a site, size of groups as well as timing of the visits (i.e. ecosystems may easily be disturbed during sensitive periods such as breeding season for delicate species³).

A tangible phenomenon exemplifying this drain of resources resulting from the rapid development of ecotourism is the misuse of water in areas of the world where water might not be a cheap commodity. Indeed, the presence of tourists typically implies a higher burden on arid destinations facing water shortages⁴; no matter what degree of awareness is reached by ecotourists, very few, if not none, will be able to reduce their consumption to the levels of the local population. In fact, local communities are often forbidden from accessing infrastructure built to ensure safe drinking water.

Additionally, many establishments marketing themselves as ecotourism destinations tend to justify room prices by privileging guests' comfort. Indeed, numerous ecotouristic establishments provide wild landscapes to guests seeking a sense of adventure while allowing them to retreat to their air-conditioned haven when desired. Yet, providing special amenities and services such as swimming pools, spas and wellness centers consume tremendous amounts of water and largely contribute to the depletion and contamination of water sources for local communities⁵.

Economic

From a macroeconomic standpoint, ecotourism may place a nation in the uncomfortable situation of increased economic reliance. Because ecotourism's existence and success hinges around the attraction of both foreign demand and supply, developing nations have no other choice but to accept this double-edged dependence in spite of the abuses that might occur.

Ecotourism developments are typically financed by foreign investors in order to enter untapped markets and natural reserves and "sell the environment and the resources it provides as its product."⁶ Ecotourism allows foreign investors from wealthier nations to cheaply exploit the local labor and use the natural resources as a differentiating factor against its competition.

Additionally, developing nations having benefited from short-term gains generated by a growing ecotourism sector are generally inclined to devote substantial financial resources under the form of tax breaks in order to further incentivize the arrival of foreign investors. Not only poor developing nations suffer from drastic trade deficits, they are now furthering their degree of dependence on wealthier nations to the detriment of a healthy and self-sustained long-term equilibrium. The underlying logic to this argument rests in the idea that until a third party ceases to take advantage of your resources, you will not be able to leverage them yourself, grasp the full benefits from them, and eventually complete your own development.

¹ TIES Global Ecotourism Fact Sheet, updated in 2006, published on www.ecotourism.org

² Article New York Times: "Growth of Ecotourism raises concern"

³ *Ecotourism: management and assessment*, by Dimitrios Diamantis, published in 2004

⁴ <http://www.tourismconcern.org.uk/index.php?page=water-abuse>

⁵ Ibid

⁶ *Ecotourism: management and assessment*, Dimitrios Diamantis, published in 2004

On the other hand, developing nations favoring ecotourism expose their whole economy to fluctuations in the global demand for rooms. In other words, ecotourism pushes countries in development to emphasize the use of their environment for tourism rather than agriculture. Doing so translates into a poorly diversified economy as well as a greater reliance on the cyclical patterns of demand upon which a steady growth cannot be secured.

Equity

In theory, ecotourism acknowledges and strives to fulfill its duty to understand and contribute to the well-being of surrounding communities remote from urban centers. However, the reality of ecotourism in our present societies often involves a breach of that duty which, regrettably, is often ignored by both the public and avid developers.

Indeed, ecotourism's sociocultural impacts are often overlooked as ecotourism continues to develop near some the most culturally vulnerable communities (i.e. indigenous communities often used to market a destination¹). As Wearing aptly quotes a popular phrase in indigenous communities, "Tourism is like fire, it can cook your food or burn down your house."²

As ecotourism promotes far-flung, exotic destinations to potential overseas customers, it attempts to provide good value by assigning a price tag to a subculture. Because this commercialization of culture is driven by the market, it is extremely hard to control or manage. This lack of control ultimately leads to the undermining of local communities' authenticity as well as their credibility within the larger political frame of their country.

A part from the erosion of cultural traditions, ecotourism has shown other detrimental consequences resulting from its development across the world: the displacement of remote communities. Rather than empowering communities and allowing them to affirm their traditions with pride, ecotourism may cause the loss of communities' rights to their land³.

Ecotourism has become such a popular trend around the world that governments in developing countries, conscious of the potential pecuniary gains, may not hesitate to suddenly evict inhabitants of remote areas in the name of conservation without providing any form of indemnity⁴. The impact from being forcibly displaced from their traditional land is significant when considering more vulnerable communities such as the indigenous groups⁵.

Through the aforementioned assessment of ecotourism's drawbacks, we are able to comprehend the importance of controlled planning of resources and processes to develop a responsible and viable ecotourism and minimize the negative externalities of this development.

¹ *Ecotourism : impacts, potential, and possibilities*, by Stephen Wearing, published in 2003

² Ibid

³ *Ecotourism: management and assessment*, by Dimitrios Diamantis, published in 2004

⁴ <http://www.tourismconcern.org.uk/>

⁵ Ibid

Case Study: Camp Jabulani

Camp Jabulani opened in 2004 is a luxury safari lodge which balances the needs of its guests and the demands of conservation. Camp Jabulani has six large suites each with plunge pools, well separated from one another. Inside each suite features a fireplace, a soaking tub, and luxurious linens. The suites are designed similar to tents, allowing the walls to be raised during the day, giving the guest a camp-like experience. Camp Jabulani is affiliated with Relais Chateaux, a leading operator or luxury hotels and restaurants around the globe. Rates for Camp Jabulani start at \$1,180 double occupancy per night, including meals, game drives and airport transfers.



Camp Jabulani was created to support a growing herd of twelve elephants that were rescued from war veterans who planned to kill each elephant. The camp previously had rescued one baby elephant which founders of the camp named "Jabulani" meaning to rejoice. In 2002, the owners of



the camp and the caretakers of the elephants decided to join their efforts to open Camp Jabulani which objective is to help fund the care of the elephants and allow guests the experience to interact with elephants.

Camp Jabulani spends minimal on marketing dollars; however, on its website, the camp is characterized and advertised as a unique ecotourism destination. Indeed, Camp Jabulani prides its commitment to sustainability efforts. For example, the camp uses filtered river water to supply the bathrooms. The camp also used biodegrade soap and other bathroom amenities. The camp also prides itself on the high quality of care that the elephants receive, which is funded through guests' expenditures during their stay.

Camp Jabulani owner, Ms. Roode, claims that "each elephant is housed in immaculate stables." Ms. Roode is extremely focused on fundraising for other wild animals as well. Thanks to a portion of the revenues earned from operations (i.e. guests' financial contribution for staying at the hotel), Roode was able to create a trust fund which resources would be deployed for the preservations of South African animal species. For instance, the camp has enough funds to actively promote cheetah sponsorships and organize fundraising benefits taking place at the camp and within the greater Cape Town area. "I fight for the survival of these animals," says Roode.

Additionally, Camp Jabulani owners created Hoedspruit Endangered Species Centre which was started with the help of financial resources also earned from the camp's operations.

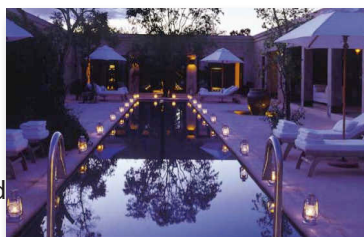
earn higher wages without diverging from the camp's main focus: animals' wellbeing.

Guests staying at Camp Jabulani have the opportunity to participate in exceptional wildlife experiences. The camp houses an Endangered Species Center that allows guests to interact with cheetahs and other species. Unlike many other South African camps that use oil sipping Land Rovers, Camp Jabulani offers a more eco-friendly option to its guests: an elephant-back safaris through the natural terrain that the camp sits on. According to Roode, "there's nothing like viewing plains game while riding atop an elephant... They walk so softly in the bush." This way, guests tend to get closer to the wildlife as animals do not have to hide as they hear the loud engine of a SUV. Through similar initiatives, Roode has succeeded in creating a memorable sense of experience for her clientele at a reduced environmental cost.

All in all, Camp Jabulani offers guests the opportunity to personally interact with South African wildlife, while supporting it directly.

Case Study: Singita Lebombo

Singita Lebombo is a 15-suite luxury property resting on a 15-hectares concession in the Kruger National Park, one of the most celebrated protected areas in the world. The Kruger National Park is particularly renowned for the unique diversity of its wildlife, size, history of conservation as well as its easy access¹.



Perched amongst the Lebombo mountains, guests staying at Singita Lebombo have the opportunity to experience a full immersion in South Africa's peaceful landscapes and respectfully discover both local nature and culture. Singita Lebombo is not only one of the most important players in South Africa's Safari industry it is also a forerunner in African ecotourism. Indeed, Singita Lebombo is one of the few



establishments in South Africa that has achieved a balance between offering luxurious accommodations and maintaining a minimal footprint on surrounding ecosystems and most importantly on communities.

Because management at Singita Lebombo realizes the weight of tourism's burden on local communities, it strives to improve the quality of life of local population and contribute to the socioeconomic development of the region. In fact, the lodge has been awarded with the prestigious Fair Trade in Tourism South Africa (FTTSA)² which relies on fair share, democracy, respect, reliability, transparency, and sustainability³. Conveying these values to educate travelers about the protection of local cultures is a one of ecotourism's main challenges which Singita Lebombo prides itself on fulfilling.

One of the many successful initiatives led by the hotel's social responsibility program is the creation of the Singita Community Tour⁴. The implementation of the Singita Community Tour was initiated and carried through by Zamani Mathebula who, at the time, was working as a waiter at the lodge and had to answer customers' frequent inquiries about his background and daily life in his village⁵. As Singita's management endeavors to train and empower its local employees, Zamani was able to implement this community tour to share his village's values and customs with customers⁶. This kind of initiatives develops awareness within travelers while allowing locals to take an active role in their economy.

Singita offers extensive training and development efforts to its staff in order to provide them with lifelong skills which they may transfer and utilize in their future career. In its pursuit of educating local populations, Singita Lebombo has also created a Field Guides & Trackers Academy for which it grants sponsorships (i.e. \$3,000) to local students, a 1-year development program at the Singita School of Cooking used as a segue for the hiring of local youths, and a support program for neighboring pre-schools and primary schools¹. Singita's broader initiatives range from outsourcing services such as linen repairs, waste disposal, and beverage supplies to suppliers and local third parties located in communities at the outskirts of the park².

Though Singita Lebombo's participation within local communities is impressive, its fulfillment of ecotourism's principles also concerns environmental conservation matters. Every employee working at the lodge must learn and understand throughout his/her training what Singita's 'Touch the earth lightly' philosophy is. 'Touch the earth lightly' was the guiding principle for the sustainable physical design³ of the lodge as well as the conservation measures or surrounding ecosystems.

Unlike many establishments which only care about their environmental footprint once the hotel is built, Singita Lebombo has integrated the construction of its lodge into an early sustainable framework. As Arup, a renowned consulting design firm hired by the lodge, each of the 15 suites are "built from bleached wood and glass supported on wooden stilts connected to the rock with steel plates to minimize the amount of concrete used."⁴ The lodges' common spaces were built using natural materials such as "compacted earth for the walls, timber sourced from local plantations, and rocks from the construction of local roads for the cladding."⁵ While wealthier guests might think that a lodge built with local natural materials must be quite pitiful, Singita Lebombo serves as a great example to break this misconception and show to travelers from all around the world that both luxury and sustainability can coexist. In Arup consultants' words: it is luxury which "can one day be broken down, leaving no trace."⁶

Though Singita's 'Touch the earth lightly' may be considered as a marketing play on the hotel's part to romanticize ecotourism's image to foreigners, it is clear that the lodge has aptly conveyed the values of its philosophy which yields tangible results for its community.

1 <http://www.lonelyplanet.com> - Kruger National Park Report

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4 <http://www.ecoafrika.com>

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3 http://www.arup.com/Projects/Singita_Lebombo_Lodge.aspx

4 Ibid

5 Ibid

6 Ibid

Conclusion

As the report presents, there are many benefits and drawbacks to ecotourism both on a global scale and in South Africa in particular. Ecotourism has merged the typical vacation experience with the opportunity to help the environment and/or local community at the same time. Furthermore, ecotourism has brought in financial resources to poverty stricken areas around the world. With the right efforts and the adequate planning, ecotourism may decrease the world's poverty levels, increase education levels and create jobs. The notion of ecotourism is to help sustain the world's resources by giving people the access to see and experience them. Both case studies in the report demonstrate the overall success of ecotourism. Indeed, after guests experienced a stay at either Singita Lebomo or Camp Jabulani, they had had the opportunity to positively contribute to the environment and the local communities.

Over the course of this project, we have gained a new understanding for ecotourism and how hotels/lodges in South Africa have adapted to this new form of tourism. Initially, we had a third lodge in South Africa that we were going to include. However, after learning more about this lodge, we found that it falsely advertised as truly being an ecotourism destination. This is the case for many hotels throughout the world. Companies have re-imaged their marketing efforts to "greenwash" customers and gain tremendous profits associated with the label of ecotourism. In fact, these hotels may be harmful to the environment and tend to ignore the consequences of their presence within the local communities. Customers aspiring to vacation in a responsible manner need to actively research the particular hotel they plan to stay at.

We hope that this report offered you enough information to fulfill your curiosity about ecotourism and provided you with thoughtful insights about the topic.

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