

Panel Session IV
Issues of Common Concern to be Addressed through Regional Cooperation

An Overview of Eco-Tourism and Its Implications for Northeast Asia¹

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Abstract

The process of defining eco-tourism is a difficult one, given that there is no universally-accepted definition that unconditionally applies to all aspects of what makes up eco-tourism. Given such challenges, one possible solution is to describe environmentally-friendly features of tourism rather than to insist on a universal definition of eco-tourism. Even with the features defined, the global profiling of eco-tourists remains challenging, given that there are regional and local differences between different groups of eco-tourists. For example, with emerging middle classes in the region, including those of large rising economies like China, it can be expected there will be numerically bigger numbers of eco-tourists intra-regionally within Northeast and East Asia. The cultural preferences and nuances of Northeast Asian eco-tourists may also be different from those eco-tourists of other world regions. These emerging groups of middle-class consumers are likely to have a spectrum of environmental awareness. The challenge is to design packages that are tailored to these

¹ Lim, Tai Wei, "Issues of common concern - eco-tourism and/or environmental cooperation" presented in the International Conference on "Emerging Regionalism: Paradigm Shift of International Relations in East Asia?" dated 9 March 2012 located at Cho Yiu Conference Hall, The Chinese University of Hong Kong 15:30 – 17:30 Panel Session IV – Issues of common concern to be addressed through regional cooperation (conference presentation by invitation, also part of organizing committee for this conference). This is work in progress that serves as a preliminary scope paper for further investigation on the subject matter by identifying some selected major issues involved. The author acknowledges the feedback on the paper gathered at this conference and also the editing assistance of Ms Chan Yim Ting, Helen of JAS, CUHK.

emerging groups of consumers and meet their aspirations and needs. It requires a flexible adaptation and response to the dynamic evolving trends within the industry. It may also mean hybrid mix of conventional tourism features (mass-produced packages and comfort hotels) with non-traditional eco-tourism features (high levels of environmental awareness and unique experiences). This is work in progress that serves as a preliminary scope paper for further investigation on the subject matter by identifying some selected major issues involved.

Keywords: Eco-tourism, Japan, Northeast Asia, Environment, Nature

Introduction. The process of defining eco-tourism is a difficult one, given that there is no universally-accepted definition that unconditionally applies to all aspects of what makes up eco-tourism. One narrative describes ecotourism as a "special interest travel" (SIT) with responsibility to natural sceneries by preserving them while protecting the interests of the native community and contrasts it with other SITs like nature travel with its appreciation of the external natural environment and adventure travel with a focus on outdoor activities.² Other scholars avoid talking about eco-tourism directly, preferring to couch the conversation in sustainability in achieving an equilibrium between environmental preservation and tourism.³ The advantage of a broader understanding of tourism that promotes environmental sustainability is that it provides avenue and opportunities for tourism to grow and expand in environmentally-friendly ways without boxed-in as eco-tourism which refers to a niche form of tourism that is growing but remains restricted in

² United States Department of Agriculture, Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, Veterinary Services, Centers for Epidemiology and Animal Health (USDA, APHIS, VS, CEAH), Center for Emerging Issues, "Nature Travel and Ecotourism: Animal and Human Health Concerns" dated October 2001 in Market Watch (US: USDA APHIS, VS, CEAH, Center for Emerging Issues), 2001, p. 5.

³ Sawkar, Kalidas, Ligia Noronha, Antonio Mascarenhas, O.S. Chauhan and Simad Saeed, *Tourism and the Environment: Case Studies on Goa, India, and the Maldives* (Washington: The Economic Development Institute of the World Bank, The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development/The World Bank), 1998, p. vi

numbers. According to some studies, eco-tourism is the most rapid expanding section of tourism with yearly increase between 10-30% and makes up 20% of the global tour industry.⁴ By the end of the first decade of the 21st century, World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) project the percentage of ecotourism revenues in the world's tourism industry as a whole will reach 10-15%.⁵

The imagery of eco-tourism is also that of cultural and environmental experiences without creature comforts like golf resorts and posh hotels with tours organized in rather small tour group numbers based on highly-restrictive local access rules. While growing in numbers, most tourist profiles still do not fit into this category. Therefore, a broader discussion of environmentally-friendly features of eco-tourism helps to capture different groups of tourists more broadly. Mass-manufactured experience with creature comforts may still appeal to many individuals. Nature-based tours with thematic features of the environment and natural landscapes and sceneries can be part of this mass-manufactured experience without being technically eco-tourism which comes with its own set of access rules.

Idealized imageries are associated with the idea of eco-tourism. Sirakaya describes idealized imageries of eco-tourism being “nonconsumptive, educational, and romantic tourism to relatively undisturbed and undervisited areas of immense natural beauty, and cultural and historical importance for the purposes of understanding and appreciating the natural and sociocultural history of the host destination.”⁶

⁴ United States Department of Agriculture, Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, Veterinary Services, Centers for Epidemiology and Animal Health (USDA, APHIS, VS, CEAH), Center for Emerging Issues, "Nature Travel and Ecotourism: Animal and Human Health Concerns" dated October 2001 in Market Watch (US: USDA APHIS, VS, CEAH, Center for Emerging Issues), 2001, p. 5.

⁵ Ecotourism Australia Limited and Sustainable Tourism Australia Pty Ltd, Tourism for the Future 2010-2020 Responsible Ethical, Sustainable Strategic Discussion Paper (Australia: Tourism for the Future Ecotourism Australia Limited, Sustainable Tourism Australia Pty Ltd), 2010 , unpaginated introduction

⁶ Sirakaya, Ercan, Vinod Sasidharan, and Sevil Sönmez, "Redefining Ecotourism: The

Such imageries carry a number of symbolisms and signifiers. It assumes an intellectual content in being able to understand and appreciate local history. It conjures up post-modern, post-industrial concepts of consumption with anti-material instincts. It assumes a form of folk experience that is romantic and unique without the mass-manufactured experience. Very few tour packages can fully realize these criteria.

The very idea of non-consumption driven forms of tourism conjures up controversies. The association of consumption with green notions are well-discussed by Sukhbir Sandhu, Lucie K. Ozanne, Clive Smallman and Ross Cullen in *Consumer Driven Corporate Environmentalism: Fact or Fiction?* that detail arguments of consumption as a driver of environmentally-friendly service industries. Arguments exist to indicate that consumers can be powerful guardians of environmental standards through economic strength, either withholding or proceeding with purchases and use of services. Sandhu and his team argue that such consumer power could also be exercised in the form of circulated verbal comments about certain tourism services, with consumer evaluation as a form of influence on the viability and popularity of these services.⁷ Another challenge that comes with the imagery of eco-tourism is that it carries the socioeconomic connotation of tourism emanating from industrialized economies to less-developed regions of the world.⁸ In the East and Northeast Asian intra-regional context, this may shut out large socioeconomic sectors given that emerging middle classes in the region

Need for a Supply Side View" in the Journal of Travel Research, 38(2), (US: Sage Publications), 1999, pp. 168-172 (online version at http://libres.uncg.edu/ir/uncg/f/S_Sonmez_Redefining_1999.pdf, unpaginated).

⁷ Sandhu, Sukhbir, Lucie K. Ozanne, Clive Smallman and Ross Cullen, "Consumer Driven Corporate Environmentalism: Fact or Fiction?" dated 20 July 2010 in Business Strategy and the Environment, 19(6), (Wiley INterScience/John Wiley & Sons, Ltd and ERP Environment), 2010, p. 357

⁸ Higgins, Bryan R., "The Global Structure of the Nature Tourism Industry: Ecotourists, Tour Operators and Local Businesses" in Journal of Tourism Research (Business Research Division of the University of Colorado), 35 (2), October 1996, available at <http://fama2.us.es>, unpaginated online copy.

may not have the same economic resources as those from the developed economy to enjoy ethically-conscious notions of eco-tourism towards the environment.

Given such challenges, one possible solution is to describe environmentally-friendly features of tourism rather than to insist on a universal definition of eco-tourism. One criterion may be the use of the benchmark indicator of low-carbon footprint as one yardstick to determine environmental-friendliness of tour packages and facilities. For example, the hospitality and hotel sector are responsible for 21% of the carbon dioxide emission from tourism.⁹ The quantitative extent of reducing the carbon footprint of this sector can be defined clearly than a catch-all definition for eco-tourism. Other criteria are tabulated below. Not all features are universally accepted by all definitions. It may not be as useful in a definitional debate as to have a set of features to initiate discussions on eco-tourism contoured in its broadest terms.

⁹ World Tourism Organization (Supervisor: Luigi Cabrini), "From Davos to Copenhagen and Beyond: Advancing Tourism's Response to Climate Change" in UNWTO Background Paper (UN: World Tourism Organization), 2009, p. 15

Tabulated samples and examples of some criteria and features used to describe eco-tourism

Criteria and features used to describe eco-tourism	What it signifies
Low carbon emission	Quantitative extent of reducing the carbon footprint of this sector, including releases by hotels and hospitality industry, sometimes resulting in the lack of creature comforts. Ability to track carbon emission quantitatively and develop quantitative response, e.g. planting trees or carry out other carbon-reducing activities to counterbalance carbon released in the tourism activities.
Ethical considerations	Responsibility towards natural sceneries and environments, preserving its features. For the private sector, ethical considerations can also be a form of corporate social responsibility (CSR) to compel companies to be more friendly towards the environment and protect local community interests in the areas where their activities are situated. For individuals, it could be in the form voluntary self-restraints (VSRs) where individuals mitigate their enjoyment and use of eco-tourism features in return for more

	sustainable use of the natural resource at hand.
Historical and cultural appreciation	Intellectual content of appreciating local culture and history of the native community. It is also a form of heritage factor to preserve local cultures and histories along with the natural resources. Not universally accepted as part of eco-tourism, a comparatively more recent development to reflect a broader perspectives of eco-tourism.
Unique, non-manufactured experience	Tourist experience not in the form of standardized tour package but a unique experience. The idea that eco-tourists tend to be more adventurous and take off-the-beaten-track approaches in tour experiences.
Implementation of monitoring agencies	To ensure all conditions and rules for preserving the environment and local cultures are complied with, also denote the need for clear and transparent rules and operating procedures in the first place. Sometimes, punitive measures and penalties may be involved for violations. Sometimes, adjudication mechanisms may also be necessary.
Restriction of access	Limiting access to the natural resource used in eco-tourism to

	prevent degradation. Needs to define ownership by user groups.
Tendency for eco-tourists to come from developed economies	Connotations of higher pricing for the tours and for niche consumers.
Some ideas of profit-making and long-term branding	If the natural resources involved in eco-tourism can be effectively utilized, prospects of a profitable brand can be established over time with careful attention to avoid depleting that resource. Profits can sometimes be recycled for local needs of the community and continued/sustained protection of the nature resource. If branding and long-term profitability is established, then the maintenance of that resource can be self-financing.
Partaking in local community activities	Preservation of traditional handicraft and cottage industries; observance and participation in local agricultural activities and harvests; local festivals and festivities

Future challenges. Given that there is a variety of definitions about eco-tourism and different features involved, defining a recognizable global class of eco-tourists is difficult. But, even if such universal definitions can be applied through global consensual decision-making processes through international organizations, the question of regional differences may have to be taken into consideration. In essence the global profiling of eco-tourists remains challenging given that there are regional and local differences between different groups of eco-tourists. With regards to regional profiles of eco-tourists in Northeast Asia, several trends may be detected. First, with emerging middle classes in the region, including those of large rising economies like China, it can be expected there will be

numerically bigger numbers of eco-tourists intra-regionally within Northeast and East Asia. Emerging economies within the region continues to expanding middle class consumers that are candidates for consumption in the newer, non-traditional forms of tourism. The cultural preferences and nuances of Northeast Asian eco-tourists may also be different from those eco-tourists of other world regions.

The other trend is based on demographics. Northeast Asian economies have aging populations with Japan and South Korea amongst the world’s most rapidly-aging societies and China potentially following suit due to enforced one-child policy. Elderly tourists are likely to have special needs in terms of infrastructure and facilities. They may also have greater observance of traditions and established/entrenched ideas of culture, heritage and history. Japan is an advanced example of an aging population and one impact is the depopulation of its rural areas. On the one hand, this implies the positive prospects of an ecologically-correct rural countryside with less dense and congested environments. Eventually some of these depopulated areas are integrated back with nature as manmade infrastructure gets overtaken by the advancing wilderness. But it may also mean less manpower or energetic/youthful leadership to maintain those resources or enforce access to those resources.

Contrasting with the growing senior populations, younger generations of eco-tourists in the Northeast Asian region have growing numbers that tend to be tech-savvy with an online presence in the form of email communication, mobile communications, tweeting, micro-blogging, Facebook use and other new and social media usage. They are also likely to want to seek information online and exert their consumer power through word of mouth disseminated efficiently through the use of social media. These emerging groups of middle-class consumers are likely to be located in a spectrum of environmental awareness. The challenge is to design packages that are tailored to these emerging groups of consumers and meet their aspirations and needs. It requires a flexible adaptation and response to the dynamic evolving trends within the industry. It may also mean hybrid mix of conventional tourism features (mass-produced

packages and comfort hotels) with non-traditional eco-tourism features (high levels of environmental awareness and unique experiences).

Another trend may be, due to increase intra-regional increases in eco-tourists, it may encourage greater Intra-regional cooperation in this sector. Given the serious challenges and problems that any form of regional cooperation faces in Northeast Asia (due to historical memories, territorial issues and other points of disagreement), greater regional cooperation can only be possible if the process is open, transparent and inclusive. Openness allows extra-regional participants, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and international organizations (IOs) to join in. The combined resources of these stakeholders can help to preserve trans-boundary resources such as maritime resources and observation of migratory species that do not observe borders and boundaries. Regional cooperation ranges from loose and flexible arrangements focusing on information-sharing rather than committed executive decisions to institutionalized ones with its own secretariat. They may focus on capacity-building activities such as translating manuals for eco-tourism, technical assistance, academic studies, online activities, training, exchanges between technical personnel, etc. The outcome of the mode of cooperation is likely to be based on pragmatism, shaped and crafted by the conditions of the region and market forces. Eventually, regionally-oriented institutions may need international networking and linkages as well as recognition for legitimacy.

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