

Evolution of Ecotourism: No Crisis

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Abstract: McKercher (2010) claims that ecotourism suffered from exaggerated early projections which collapsed owing to a crisis of confidence amongst academics. This is not supported by available evidence, which indicates that the commercial ecotourism subsector continues to grow slowly and steadily, and largely ignores academics.

Keywords: economics, scale, communications, research, sustainability

Introduction

McKercher (2010) argues that geographers (p. 22), who knew little about business (pp. 20, 23), held unrealistic hopes for ecotourism (pp. 16-19) which persuaded naive entrepreneurs (pp. 15, 20) into undercapitalised start-ups (p. 20), and second-tier universities (p. 22) to enrol students in poorly-designed courses (p. 18) with no career prospects (p. 18); but then suffered a collective crisis of confidence (pp. 15-24), and have now retracted their projections (pp. 21-24). His arguments, however, suffer from a series of scholastic shortcomings, and his conclusions are not supported by the limited evidence actually available.

Some sections of his article are indeed accurate: for example, that tourism was touted as a “smokestack-free industry” which could provide “a wide economic opportunity for peripheral regions” (p.16); that income from tourism is often “sporadic, seasonal and concentrated among a few individuals” (p. 16); that “many businesses were using the [ecotourism] label without any commitment” (p. 17); that “the term was misappropriated by industry and government as a marketing tool” (p. 17); and that “[l]egitimate fears were also raised that ecotourism could initiate the development life-cycle in remote areas” (p.17). These components, however, do not support his central thesis.

Scholastic Shortcomings

McKercher’s article is short on data. It does not provide economic statistics on historical trends or geographic patterns in ecotourism. It does not analyse the content of research publications, university courses, government policy documents, industry lobbying materials, commercial products, or marketing materials. It does not examine communications between academia and industry, either in person or through publications.

It makes assertions (pp. 16-19) about “assumptions”, “rhetoric”, “beliefs”, “polarisation”, and similar phrases indicating knowledge of individual human mental states, with no evidence of any such knowledge. It claims (p. 22) that ecotourism research was established by academics who: “needed to establish a role for themselves in non-business tourism areas”; brought their own “ideological leanings” to their research; were “complicit” and “biased”; “had to accept the veracity of other studies unquestioningly”; and “repeated dubious, exaggerated figures”. It claims

repeatedly, but without evidence, that ecotourism has “plunged” into a “crisis of legitimacy” (pp. 15-21), a “crisis of confidence” (p. 23) or even an “inevitable crisis of confidence” (p. 24).

It claims (p. 16) that ecotourism research arose from sustainable tourism. The earliest academic publications on ecotourism, however (Romeril 1985; Young 1986), were 5 years before the first on sustainable tourism (Nash and Butler 1990; Pigram 1990). Ecotourism research also has long antecedents in outdoor tourism and recreation, reviewed by Pearce (1985) and Edington and Edington (1986); whereas research in sustainable tourism did not gain momentum until the 1990s (Buckley 1996).

McKercher’s article argues (p. 22) that academics “played a central role in the formation of many ecotourism associations”. There are at least 16 ecotourism associations and societies worldwide¹. For most, no academics are listed amongst the founders and Boards. The Australian association includes one academic in an 11-member Board. One of the founders of the Fijian association is an academic now, but not at the time.

In arguing for early exaggeration (p. 18), McKercher cites purported projections of US Forest Service ecotourism revenue. He takes these figures, however, from an unrefereed posting, with no citation data for the original reference, made by a government tourism official, on a botanical gardens website. In fact, these statistics are from the US Forest Service itself, are actual rather than projected, and refer principally to ski resorts.

In arguing for a high failure rate of ecotourism start-ups, McKercher (p. 20) cites a single consultant’s opinion, from an interview in a non-academic newsletter, based on an uncited report, about international aid funding. McKercher and Robbins (1998), also mentioned, did not actually present data on failure rates for ecotourism business start-ups. Longevity data for Australian outdoor tourism operators (Buckley 1999) did not include survival or failure rates, since they were derived from a single retrospective survey. There are several known time-series datasets of ecotourism enterprises, but none have been analysed or published.

McKercher’s article confuses cause and correlation, whilst criticising other research for the same fault (p. 18-19). It confuses means and extremes in time series analysis. It confuses ecotourism, adventure tourism and nature-based tourism (pp. 18-19) whilst criticising the same error.

It misquotes Weaver and Lawton (2007), Zhao and Ritchie (2007) and Buckley (2009a). It cites only selective and secondary sources in economics (p. 16), biology, anthropology and archaeology (p. 17). It draws sweeping generalisations from single case studies (pp. 16-21). It uses undefined and essentially meaningless terms such as “true” ecotourism and “true” corporate social responsibility; and tautologous terms such as “sustainable ecotourism”. It concludes with a truism: “sustainability will always be an issue”. Taken singly, these are not fatal errors; but taken together, they greatly weaken McKercher’s contentions.

Evidence

McKercher's central thesis seems to be that both academic projections and actual commercial activity in ecotourism were small in the 1980s, larger in the 1990s, and smaller in the 2000s; and that industry trends were driven by academic involvement. To test these claims would require (i) a complete set or representative series of academic statements about the economic scale of ecotourism over the past three decades; (ii) a reliable three-decade time series on the number and scale of new commercial ecotourism businesses established, according to a standardised definition; and (iii) evidence of a causal link between academic research and commercial practice, i.e. that commercial tourism enterprises knew what academics were saying and changed their practices accordingly.

Recent reviews of publications and practices in ecotourism (Buckley 2009a,b; Weaver and Lawton 2007), make no suggestion of three historical phases, and neither do compendia of case studies (Buckley 2003a; Zeppel 2006). McKercher's article does not provide evidence to indicate otherwise.

Estimates of economic scale for ecotourism differ both because data are unreliable, and since they refer to different subsectors of the tourism industry. Tourists' actions don't match their motivations (McKercher 2010). Visitor counts on site don't match surveys at airports (Buckley 2003b, 2009c). Supply-side estimates don't match demand-side, and top-down estimates don't match bottom-up (Buckley 2009b, 2010a). Tourism enterprises which contribute to conserving biodiversity constitute only a tiny fraction of the outdoor tourism industry as a whole (Buckley 2009b, 2010a,b). None of this has changed. The number of reported nature-based tourism operations contributing to conservation and communities, however, has continued to increase slowly but steadily (Buckley 2010b; Gössling and Hultman 2006; NACSO 2008; Saarinen et al. 2009; Spenceley 2008; Stronza and Durham 2008).

There is little evidence of information flow from academia to industry. An ecotourism book by *Lonely Planet* drew only on secondary sources (Buckley 2008). The now-defunct Cooperative Research Centre for Sustainable Tourism, supposedly an academic-industry partnership, produced only one document with large-scale take-up: 20,000 copies of minimal-impact guidelines for four-wheel-drive tours (Buckley 2002). Academics and industry members of the Tourism and Travel Research Association "have little awareness of each other in terms of knowledge production and use", according to Xiao and Smith (2010: 410), who cited six previous publications with similar conclusions. Management agencies for World Heritage Areas consult both tourism practitioners and ecotourism researchers, but there is no evidence that the tour operators follow ecotourism research findings.

Conclusions

McKercher's article was not presented as hypotheses, autoethnography or personal opinion, but as a review. As outlined above, however, it does not provide primary data, and it mixes reputable refereed publications with the idiosyncratic opinions of individual industry protagonists, with little concern for methodological rigour. If the social sciences are ever to escape their current position at the bottom of the hierarchy

of sciences (Fanelli 2010), they must, at the very least, demonstrate reliable academic scholarship.

McKercher claims (p. 15) that “ecotourism arguably would not exist, and certainly would not exist in the form it is now, were it not for the active involvement of the academic community”. This seems to be simply incorrect. Historical trends in the economic scale of ecotourism, and the potential influence of academics, remain open questions. The weight of evidence, however, indicates firstly that commercial ecotourism is continuing to grow, slowly but steadily; and secondly, that academic research in ecotourism has had rather little influence on commercial practice.

Footnotes/Endnotes

1. Australia, Asia-Pacific, Belize, Ecuador, Hawaii, Hong Kong, India, International, Kamchatka, Kenya, Malaysia, Murghab, Pakistan, Saskatchewan, Sweden, Toledo.

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