Trends and Lags in the Use of Ecotourism Terminology in the Scholarly and Popular Press

Introduction

Whilst the term ecotour was first coined half a century ago, it did not gain significant currency in the academic tourism literature until the 1990s (Weaver and Lawton 2007). Though a much-contested concept in a technical sense, it has found considerable favour in political debate, albeit often in ways which do not mesh well with scholarly definitions (Weaver and Lawton 2007).

In recent years, a number of parallel or similar terms have also gained in popularity. These include product-based concepts such as nature-based tourism, management-based concepts such as sustainable tourism, and socially-based concepts such as responsible tourism. It has recently been claimed (McKercher 2010) that ecotourism is in decline; and whilst these claims have been criticized on scholastic grounds (Buckley 2010), it remains an open question whether ecotourism terminology has been superseded .

Here, therefore, we track the use of the term over the past three decades, in both the academic and popular literature, to test both for time-series trends in each one individually, and for correspondence or lags between the two sets of references.

Methods

Academic references derive from three sources: databases maintained by organizations such as CIRET (2011); bibliographies in ecotourism textbooks such as those by Weaver (2008) or Buckley (2009); and Google® Scholar® searches. The first two of these do not claim to be comprehensive, and also contain references whose content is relevant to ecotourism but which do not necessarily use ecotourism terminology. To analyse trends over time, therefore, we rely on the Google® Scholar® Advanced Search Tools. We searched for journal articles in the business, natural sciences and social sciences groups, in all languages, which contain either 'ecotourism' or 'eco tourism' in the title. We excluded patents and citations. The date bracket search tools allowed us to search for particular historical periods and thus construct time series. Since every item found is listed, we checked the entire listings to ensure that they do indeed use the ecotourism term in the title.

Popular references are derived from two sources. The first set is from unrestricted Google® web searches using Advanced Search options. The second and more detailed set is derived from a proprietary commercial media watch service, Meltwater News® (2011), which maintains a searchable database of newspaper and blog sites worldwide. We used only the mass media sources, i.e. excluding private blogs and social media. We searched for items with either ecotourism or eco tourism in the title, using a Boolean operator function.

Results

Results are summarised in Table 1. Scholarly articles identified by Google Scholar searches commenced in the 1980s with three items overall, followed by four in 1990. (There were also early reports and other items without peer review). Annual publication rates remained low until mid 1990s. From 1995-2010 inclusive, the number of scholarly publications where ecotourism appears in the title grew in an approximately linear fashion to over 200 per annum, with a rate of increase of ~15 articles annually. The total number of items recorded by this search is ~2000.

The total number of items with ecotourism or eco tourism in the title, as identified by an unrestricted Google Web search, is ~16,800. Checking the first few thousand of these indicates that they do indeed all match the search criteria. Using the more rigorous Boolean feature of the Advanced Search operation, rather than the undeclared algorithm of the basic Google search, greatly reduces the likelihood of extraneous items.

Data from the Meltwater News media search service, generated month by month for the past 20 years, yielded no items at all until 2001, when four items were identified. Growth was slow until 2005 and rapid thereafter. There is very considerable variation month to month, and the availability of monthly data from this source allows calculation of both means and standard deviations year by year (Table 1). Because of this high variability, statistical fitting of higher order trend curves is not justified.

From 2003 to mid 2011 inclusive, the number of newspaper items worldwide with ecotourism or eco tourism in titles or headlines grew to over 2000 per annum, at a rate of ~300 additional items per year: ecotourism continues to grow in the popular perception. The total number of items yielded by this search is ~11,000, which is not dissimilar to the Google search results, allowing for the somewhat more restricted set of sources. Both approaches include some individual items which appear multiple times, so they may not provide reliable totals, but they do provide robust indicators of trends over time.

The mass media mentions are skewed towards particular countries. The largest set, approximately 34.5%, is derived from the USA. This is somewhat surprising, since the term did not initially find favour there. The second largest is India, with approximately 9.4%, followed by the UK and Australia at around 5% each, Canada at 4%, and the Philippines and China at a little over 3% each. These patterns, however, may merely reflect the relative availability of online editions of newspapers in different countries.

The growth in popular use of the term ecotourism thus lags scholarly publications by about a decade. Mentions in the academic literature commenced in the early 1990s,

and began to grow strongly after 1995. Growth in the popular literature began in the early years of the current millennium, with major growth only since 2005. To some degree, however, this may also reflect the dates at which different publications became available on line.

Conclusions

Perusing the content of items identified by these searches, it is clear that many would not qualify as ecotourism under more restrictive academic definitions. Our aim here, however, is not to test whether the examples of ecotourism in practice are continuing to increase, but whether the concept remains in favour. Clearly, it does.

The most robust, reliable and significant result from these analyses is thus that despite the appearance of competing terms, both the research community and the broader public continue to use the term ecotourism with ever-increasing frequency.

The approach used here could well be applied to investigating popular take-up of other tourism terms which originated in academic research. In particular, data from proprietary services such as that used here can be disaggregated in detail by place and time of publication, providing information on geographic patterns, and time series with statistical measures of variability.

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Table 1

Year	Scholarly publications	Newspaper items		
		total for year	mean per month	standard deviation
1990	4	0	-	-
1991	5	0	-	-
1992	10	0	-	-
1993	30	0	-	-
1994	31	0	-	-
1995	26	0	-	-
1996	59	0	-	-
1997	35	0	-	-
1998	58	0	-	-
1999	72	0	-	-
2000	66	0	-	-
2001	82	4	0.3	0.6
2002	117	20	1.7	2.6
2003	133	54	4.5	3.3
2004	148	94	7.8	3.0
2005	156	279	23.3	22.6
2006	147	770	64.2	29.5
2007	193	1360	113.3	48.2
2008	195	1792	149.3	34.0
2009	215	1995	166.3	55.2
2010	181	1976	164.7	51.3
2011*	164	2256	188.0	45.1

*Totals for 2011 estimated at 2 x totals for Jan-Jun inclusive.
Monthly statistics for 2011 based on 6 months only.