

# Looking into the Future of Ecotourism and Sustainable Tourism

**Michael Lück**

*Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies, Brock University, St Catharines, Ontario, Canada*

The World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) launched the report *Our Common Future* in 1987 and set a milestone in terms of the world's development (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). Sustainable Development became a key issue in all parts of our daily lives, and tourism, the world's largest industry, adopted the idea and is striving for a Sustainable Tourism Development (STD). Over the short and long term STD should:

- meet the needs and wants of the local host community in terms of improved living standards and quality of life;
- satisfy the demands of tourists and the tourism industry, and continue to attract them in order to meet the first aim; and,
- safeguard the environmental resource base for tourism, encompassing natural, built and cultural components, in order to achieve both of the preceding aims. (Hunter, 1995: 155–6)

Clearly, the objectives of STD are similar to those identified in the wide variety of definitions of ecotourism. A look into the different definitions shows all too clearly that we are far away from any all-encompassing definition. However, there are a few aspects that seem to be apparent and re-occurring in the STD aims, such as a sense for the host community, conservation of natural, built and cultural heritage and resources, and the generation of revenue. Similar to ecotourism, everyone seems to agree that there is a need for STD, but what it actually entails remains somewhat vague (Wheeller, 1994). The complexity of the tourism industry makes it almost impossible to find a suitable definition (and code of conduct) for all parts within the wide spectrum of tourism. The market is extremely heterogeneous and can be influenced, but certainly not totally controlled (Wheeller, 1991).

Experts still have different views about the 'real' sustainable tourism. While Poon (1993), for example, sees a trend away from mass tourism (although 'mass tourism will not disappear'), Wheeler (1994) predicts the trend to even more mass tourism:

I am, however, amazed by their assertion, that [. . .] the concept of mass tourism [. . .] has no relevance for growth in the next decade. To me it has every relevance as we move towards, not away from, megamass tourism. (Wheeller, 1994: 652)

No matter which form of tourism we will see predominantly in the future, all sorts of tourism are dependent on resources, especially natural and cultural. The challenge is to manage the use of those resources in a sustainable way. Ever increasing numbers of tourists all over the world are setting resources under a growing pressure. One school of thought suggests that sustainable does not necessarily mean small-scale tourism. In fact, 'large-scale, spatially concentrated tourism may, as it is argued, act as a 'safety-valve' syphoning off potential demand for scarce resources elsewhere and it may keep mass tourism firmly in its place' (Wheeller, 1991: 93–4). Eco and similar forms of tourism are seen as the most destructive forms of tourism. Ecotourists endeavour to constantly discover new, untouched areas. Negative impacts often are not avoided, but rather spatially spread. The classic word of 'mass follows class' applies perfectly and ecotourism destinations soon have to cope with large amounts of 'normal' tourists. Destinations, such as Costa Rica, Zanzibar and Belize are examples of this development. Formerly difficult to travel to and examples of best practice ecotourism, now all are served by major charter airlines, which paved the way for mass tourism in these ecologically and culturally sensitive destinations.

There are lots of obstacles to overcome with the attempt to implement ecotourism and/or STD codes. The example of the small island of Niue in the South Pacific, introduced by Heidi de Haas, shows that constraints include the dependency on the schedules of major airlines. This very well illustrates one of the conflicts of sustainable tourism: small destinations would appreciate more frequencies by major airlines in order to receive sufficient numbers of visitors for viable operation, while once they got the numbers as mentioned above, it can result in adverse effects due to too many tourists. Political instability means a major financial risk for investors. Changing policies and laws make it very difficult for small companies and communities to develop a healthy operation, as shown in Thea Shoeman's article about tourism in the Qwa-Qwa National Park in South Africa.

The major task will possibly be to define common rules and codes of conduct. This is necessary in order to establish a transparent system for the consumer. With the advent of the term ecotourism, many tour operators and hoteliers adapted the term without changing anything within their actual behaviour and operational procedures, as illustrated in Ron Mader's contribution 'eco sells' and they use the term for effective marketing. The need not only for a common code of conduct but also for independent audits and certification arose. There have been many local and national attempts to find common grounds and labels, for example, the 'Top Team Natur(e)' and the 'Gruene Koffer' (Green Suitcase) in Germany (Krause, 1998), and the *Best Practice Ecotourism* programme of the Commonwealth Department of Tourism in Australia (Commonwealth Department of Tourism, 1995). However, a global system was absent for a long period of time. After the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, Agenda 21 became an issue in tourism operations throughout the world. Subsequently in 1994, the idea of 'Green Globe 21' (GG21) was developed as a global system for individuals, companies and communities. Green Globe 21 means:

- quality alliances for global coverage and local implementation;
- state of the art environment management and support systems;

clear standards based on ISO and Agenda 21;  
 independent certification;  
 worldwide, web-driven promotion of brand holders for consumers. (Green Globe, 2000)

The advantages are obvious: participating companies and communities are independently assessed and certified and consumers have the opportunity to check Green Globe's website free of charge and can rely on the quality of certified companies in their destination. The costs for participating companies are relatively small. Depending on the size of the company, costs range from \$US350 to \$US5000, while communities are charged with \$US50,000 in the first phase. Consecutive costs depend on the size of the community and the intensity of service and consultancy required. Assessment and implementation of the standards are time consuming and it can take up to a few years until a participating company is officially certified. However, the effort alone is also awarded by the right of using the GG21 logo. Once certification has been completed, the GG21 logo with a tick may be used for advertising purposes (Green Globe, 2000). (Figure 1.)



Figure 1 Green Globe logos

The future in ecotourism and sustainable tourism certainly lies in a symbiosis of different forms of tourism. Mass tourism has its place in this development and it would be naive to think that the ever growing tourism on this planet could be without mass tourism. Therefore, it is the challenge for planners and managers to make a difference. Exemplary projects worthy to copy are those of TUI and LTU (as shown before in my paper Large-scale ecotourism – A contradiction in itself?), who take responsibility for their actions. Education and interpretation is crucial for a better understanding and a more conscious behaviour of the tourists. Green Globe 21 also is a valuable approach and deserves attention all over the world. 'Eco-Pirates' will not be able to use the logo and the consumer benefits from an independent transparent system. Problems, for example for SeaCanoe (as described by Noah Shepherd), can be overcome. Local poaching operators would not be certified and once Green Globe 21 is well established, ideally would be avoided by tourists.

### Correspondence

Any correspondence should be directed to Michael Lück, Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies, Brock University, St Catharines, Ontario, Canada L2S 3A1 (mlueck@brocku.ca/michael.lueck@brocku.ca).

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