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Abstract: This chapter introduces the key stakeholders involved in ecotourism and provides an overview of some of the major challenges faced by the ecotourism industry in addressing, developing and implementing quality ecotourism. The following chapters present fourteen chapters from a range of ecotourism stakeholders including tourists', communities', protected area managers', ecotour guides' and ecotourism industries'. This part of the book explores a range of stakeholders' views on how best to pursue quality in ecotourism, or specific elements pertinent to ecotourism principles. Some of these stakeholders have not had a strong, or indeed, any voice in the ecotourism debate, and they bring refreshingly different perspectives to the discussion.

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CHAPTER 9

Stakeholders' Perspectives on Quality in Ecotourism

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Introduction

This chapter sets the context for Part Two of the book by introducing the key stakeholders involved in ecotourism and provides an overview of some of the major challenges faced by the ecotourism industry in addressing, developing and implementing quality ecotourism. Part Two of the book presents fourteen chapters from a range of ecotourism stakeholders including tourists', communities', protected area managers', ecotour guides' and ecotourism industries'. This part of the book explores a range of stakeholders' views on how best to pursue quality in ecotourism, or specific elements pertinent to ecotourism principles. Some of these stakeholders have not had a strong, or indeed, any voice in the ecotourism debate, and they bring refreshingly different perspectives to the discussion.

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In contrast to mainstream tourism, where the range of stakeholders is relatively small and mainly restricted to those directly influenced by economic connections, the stakeholders involved in ecotourism are more diverse and eclectic. This diversity reflects the fact that ecotourism promises so much for so many – a vehicle for poverty alleviation, a spearhead for sustainable development, an education tool, a way to rejuvenate cultural traditions, a means of supporting and financing conservation projects are just a few of the potential ‘draws’. Broadly speaking, ecotourism stakeholders can include tourism enterprises, tourists (consumers), all levels of governments including protected area managers, non-government organizations (both tourism industry and those representing conservation and community interests) and development agencies. This diversity of stakeholders can be problematic when trying to assess whether quality ecotourism is achieved because different stakeholders often perceive or demand very different outcomes from their involvement (see Swarbrooke, 1999; Weaver, 2001; Honey and Rome, 2001; Epler Wood, 2002).

However, to be successful it is important that ecotourism acknowledges the range of stakeholders’ views and tries to meet and balance their different needs, demands and interests to ensure shared ownership. It is important to engage the full range of stakeholders when quality assurance tools are being developed, particularly where standards are involved. As discussed in Part One of this book a spectrum of quality assurance tools exists, many of which are voluntary and include awards, codes of conduct and certification programs. These initiatives are designed to help deliver more consistent, quality ecotourism products that better meet the ecotourism principles outlined in Chapter 1. Thus engagement with stakeholders requires clear two-way communication and appropriate participatory and consultative processes if standards are to succeed. This is partly because imposed standards remove the possibility of any sense of ownership and partly because practical suggestions, that is input into how the standard might be met, and consensus on requirements may not exist. A range of participatory processes involving consultation and decision making by communities can often lead to innovative and productive partnerships (Swarbrooke, 1999), that results in genuine community involvement and power, and for tourists an authentic ecotourism experience.

While we sought a range of stakeholders' perspectives for this book we recognize there are other important stakeholder groups we have not included, such as international funding agencies and national, regional and local governments and to a lesser extent conservation NGOs and certification program managers. These groups obviously have a considerable interest in or involvement with planning for quality in more sustainable and ecotourism development.

We know international funding agencies have been a major source of start up funding for many sustainable tourism certification programs (Epler Wood 2002) and while they are not directly represented in this book they are mentioned in several chapters, including Chapter 23 which discusses consolidating regional networks of certification programs. International funding agencies such as the World Bank, European Commission and InterAmerican Development Bank have funded many ecotourism projects with loans and grants (Epler Wood, 2002), including initiatives such as the development of a proposed global accreditation body for sustainable tourism certification programs known as the Sustainable Tourism Stewardship Council (Rainforest Alliance 2001, 2003). The development of credible quality assurance tools for ecotourism may well assist this sector to fund projects that are more likely to help alleviate poverty and be environmentally and socially sustainable.

The involvement of the public sector - local, regional and national governments in ecotourism initiatives is also important and has been discussed in detail elsewhere (Fennell and Dowling, 2003; Buckley, Pickering and Weaver, 2003). The public sector provides alternative tools to the voluntary initiatives. Specifically they consist of legislation and policy, funding and fiscal incentives, land use planning, official standards and designation of conservation areas (Swarbrooke, 1999; Weaver, 2001). National governments can play an important leadership role (WTO, 2006) for example by initiating and supporting the development of a national ecotourism strategy as in the case of the Australian Ecotourism Strategy (Commonwealth Department of Tourism, 1994). Regional and local governments also have an important role to play being involved in developing and implementing ecotourism planning guidelines (Epler Wood, 2002). This stakeholder group and these alternative tools such as government policy and regulations are glimpsed in many of the different chapters, particularly in Chapters 15 and 16. A recent,

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and detailed discussion of governments' potential role in encouraging sustainable tourism and ecotourism, and potential overlap and synergies with voluntary initiatives can be found the World Tourism Organisation report (WTO, 2006).

Non-government organizations are another important group that have threads of their interests and issues woven through many of the chapters in this book, although we have not obtained their views specifically as a stakeholder. The focus of most NGOs (such as WWF, Conservation International, Nature Conservancy Council, Flora Fauna International) is on protecting biodiversity and the natural environment, and by default trying to ensure sustainable development for local communities. The fundamental demand for quality ecotourism to integrate conservation means this group has a natural affinity with sustainable or ecotourism. This is reflected in many NGOs developing ecotourism initiatives and becoming increasingly involved in quality assurance measures. NGOs have initiated, developed and currently manage many quality assurance initiatives such as codes of conduct, ecotourism certification programs for tour operators and professional certification programs for guides. We look at two examples of these with Chapter 5 on the SmartVoyager Program for the Galapagos Islands, and Chapter 23 on regional networks presenting Rainforest Alliance's role in the Americas.

The stories of some of these stakeholders can be gleaned from some of the Chapters in Part One of this book, or have been covered by other authors, for example the story of certification program manager's has been well covered by Honey (2002), Font and Buckley (2001) and the WTO (2002).

In Part Two of the book we hear the stories of five key stakeholder groupings:

1. Ecotourists (consumers)
2. Host communities including Indigenous communities
3. Ecotour guides
4. Ecotourism industry
5. Protected area managers.

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Ecotourists/Consumers

Tourists, as the consumers of the ecotourism product, are a major stakeholder in ecotourism. However, the diversity of consumers means there are multiple voices and no one voice can represent all ecotourists.. We present two contrasting views in the following chapters, one by Xavier Font and Megan Epler Wood who present their views on current ecotourist/consumer research of what consumers think about quality in ecotourism and how they have responded to quality assurance initiatives. Their chapter is followed by Zoë Chafe's that defines the current consumer demand that exists for ecotourism, sustainable tourism, and/or responsible tourism using the results of recent surveys and polls and presents evidence that tourists are interested in purchasing ecotourism products.

Quality assurance initiatives can provide tourists with the opportunity to identify and select products and services that promote environmental, social and cultural concern and sensitivity or have a commitment to protecting the environment and respect the social, cultural, economic and political concerns of host countries and communities (Honey and Rome, 2001). However, to date consumer recognition of, and preferential choice for one of the most distinctive quality tools, certification, has been poor (Synergy, 2000; Font and Buckley, 2001; WTO, 2002; UNEP & WTO 2006). Despite the premise that 'green sells', surveys of consumers suggest that while they may express concern for environmental issues this is not translated into actual purchasing of green products (Martin, 1997; Weaver, 2001; Epler Wood, 2002; Epler Wood, 2004). Many tourism enterprises complain that quality ecotourism initiatives such as certification do not translate into increased sales. Epler Wood (2004) refers to this as the "green gap" and argues that the distance between consumer's intentions and their actions is wide. Epler Wood (2004) describes this disparity with results of a survey of ecotour operators in Ecuador where she found that although there was apparently genuine concern among tourists about environmental and social issues, less than 10% of the clients that booked ecotours requested information from operators on their eco-social standards. Nonetheless, the many consumer surveys (see Chapter 11 in this book) demonstrate that consumers interest in green products represents a latent demand for quality ecotourism that has yet to be tapped. We hope you may draw on your own experience as a consumer of tourism products and review these contrasting chapters to come to your own conclusions, and possibly solutions on how to seek and gain

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consumer's voices to facilitate the sharing of power and decisions making with consumers to ensure quality ecotourism experiences.

Host communities

Traditionally most quality initiatives in ecotourism have concentrated on environmental components and the cost savings that can be obtained through eco-efficiencies. While ecotourism is most often associated with these environmental or 'green and brown' issues, recent trends suggest a move to more people-focused issues. There has been a growing interest in harnessing tourism for poverty alleviation and the support and development of more community-based tourism projects. There has also been increasing concerns about the potential damage to reputation of advocacy organizations like Tourism Concern that have spurred greater emphasis on social and cultural issues. There is certainly an increasing recognition of the need for better consultation and more participatory community involvement in ecotourism.

As outlined in Chapter 1 one of the principles of ecotourism is providing returns to local communities. The benefits that ecotourism can provide includes not only fundamentals such as direct (and/or indirect employment) and economic benefits, but also a number of other benefits. These might include increased viability of existing accommodation houses and restaurants, provision of additional revenue to local retail businesses and other services, an increase in the market for local products and greater community awareness of the value of local/indigenous culture and the natural environment (Wearing, 2001). Quality ecotourism also offers communities opportunities such as sponsorship packages, provision or upkeep of community infrastructure and training programs.

In the context of ecotourism a host community is a group of people in an ecotourism destination, usually permanent residents who have a common interest and bond in maintaining a high quality of life for themselves (Weaver, 2001). However, as Swarbrooke (1999) points out, that while this definition suggests homogeneity, the reality it is much more complex with most local communities consisting of

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different interest groups and many voices some of which may conflict. A diversity of voices presents challenges for ecotourism planners and developers, however effective and genuine participatory processes are needed with local communities to achieve quality ecotourism.

Another of the challenges in relation to communities is to find better ways to integrate private-commercial tourism interests with community interests and needs. While traditionally communities have been reasonably well involved in influencing public sector tourism planning and development control systems, it is suggested that communities play a more proactive role to maximize direct control between themselves and tourists (Swarbrooke, 1999; Weaver, 2001). Thus, host communities situated near ecotourism attractions or facilities may regard quality initiatives in ecotourism as a way of measuring and improving the environmental and socio-cultural impacts of a tourism project that may directly or indirectly impact upon them, their culture and their life-style. In the case of certification the process may involve assessing the financial benefits to both the country and the local community. For example, criteria may specify local ownership or local partners, local hiring of staff and use and promotion of locally made products. According to Honey and Rome (2001) quality assurance tools such as certification can facilitate increased local equity and also assist communities in negotiations with investors, developers and managers of tourism facilities.

We have attempted to present the voice of contrasting communities from different regions of the world (see Chapters 12, 13, 14 in this book). The demand quality ecotourism makes for better involvement of local communities and recognition of the rights and aspirations of Indigenous people (Weaver, 2001) are particularly explored in Chapters 13 and 14 of this book.

Ecotour guides

'Ecotour guiding' is a relatively new term, which has followed ecotourism into the lexicon. Ecotour guides may be employed by ecotourism operators, adventure travel companies, natural resource management agencies (rangers), non-government agencies (NGOs), voluntary conservation organisations and

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educational institutions. Black (2002) defines an ecotour guide as someone employed on a paid or voluntary basis who conducts paying or non-paying tourists around an area or site of natural and/or cultural importance utilising the principles of ecotourism and interpretation. In other words, s/he communicates and interprets the significance of the environment, promotes minimal impact practices, ensures the sustainability of the natural and cultural environment, and hopefully motivates those tourists to consider their own lives in relation to larger ecological or cultural concerns.

In addition to being the personal ‘face’ of any organization, whether it is a natural resource management agency, tour operator or local conservation group, ecotour guides should role-model environmentally and culturally sensitive behavior as well as being responsible for leading and managing the group, and generally for providing a safe and enjoyable experience for each visitor. Ecotour guides thus perform all the generic tour guiding roles of leader, educator, public relations representative, host and conduit (Cohen, 1985; Pond, 1993), but additionally play a key role in interpreting the environment and modeling appropriate behavior such that a conservation ethic is generated.

Quality assurance initiatives such as ecotourism certification programs may benefit guides with criteria that stipulate minimum guiding standards and/or qualifications, ratios of guides to consumers and provide opportunities for training and professional development (see Crabtree and Black, 2000). All these measures contribute to high quality guiding which will ideally also translate to a better quality experience for the consumer and hence greater customer satisfaction. Professional certification of individual ecotour guides are not only important because they award qualifications but also because they may be used to benchmark existing guides standards and highlight training needs (see Chapters 17, 18 and 19 in this book; Crabtree and Black, 2000). Tour guides are usually employed by tour operators though in many small tour operations the owner/operator is also the guide. In cases where a guide is employed conflicts may arise between the guide and operator needs and motivations. All these issues bring a degree of complexity to the equation, but guides clearly play a pivotal role in the ecotourism experience and are at the interface between the consumer, operator, the environment and the host community. Their importance in providing quality ecotourism has been largely ignored by the ecotourism industry although there has been limited

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research in this area (see Weiler and Davis 1993; Haig 1997; Black 1999; Black, 2002; Weiler and Ham 2001; Ballantyne and Hughes, 2001; Black 2002; Armstrong and Weiler, 2002). We hope the three chapters that focus on guides in this book might help address this gap.

Ecotourism Industry

The ecotourism industry is a complex phenomenon comprising a variety of different sectors in tourism and including players in both the private and public sector. We define the ecotourism industry as representing the sum of those commercial and industrial activities which produce goods and services that are wholly or mainly consumed by travelers participating in ecotourism (adapted from House of Representatives Select Committee Tourism, 1978). The players may include among others, outbound and inbound tour operators, travel agents, the travel media, tour guides, transportation carriers, hotels and restaurants, visitors attractions and tourist information centers. The scale and type of organizations may vary considerably from locally owned one-person enterprises through to nationally owned chains that operate across the domestic market to large scale foreign owned controlled chains or corporations that are transnational in their operations. Ecotourism enterprises may deliver a diverse number of different products ranging from tours, attractions and accommodation, from experiences lasting a few hours to multi-day trips, to small bed and breakfast establishments to large ecolodges. The diversity that makes up the ecotourism industry means there is a huge variety in the number of potential elements that need to be considered when looking at quality.

This diversity has both benefits and challenges, for while the mosaic of players within the industry can add richness to the ecotourism fabric, it can also lead to conflicts between the different players, who have competing interests. These players may also hold different views on what ecotourism is, or should be. The fuzzy boundaries and different manifestations of ecotourism is certainly one of the problems in attempting to define ecotourism and leads to many of the challenges in developing and implementing appropriate and relevant quality assurance initiatives.

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Many commentators view commercial tourism enterprises negatively because as businesses, they are perceived as focusing on commercial activities, profits and short term gains. However, the tourism industry as a whole has increasingly embraced voluntary actions to increase environmental, socio-cultural and long-term economic sustainability through a number of different initiatives. These include some of the tools and mechanisms already addressed in this book such as awards of excellence, codes of conduct, and in some cases the development of ecotourism-specific certification programs (e.g. NEAP). Industry associations have been involved in the development and a range of quality assurance initiatives such as self-help guides and manuals (e.g. International Hotels Environment Initiative (TCA, 1998), charters, networks, and newsletters (e.g. Green Hotelier newsletter). A growing number of industry associations concerned with issues of tourism sustainability and ecotourism have been established as well as existing associations setting up special working groups (e.g. PATA Sustainable Tourism Committee). Even the travel media which is notoriously self-interested, have produced some outstanding projects as demonstrated by the recent release of Code Green by Lonely Planet Guidebooks (Lorimer and Gelber, 2006).

Many feel that all this is too little, too late and that an industry embracing self-regulation with non-enforceable codes and guidelines is just a self-interested attempt to stave off stricter controls that governments might impose through regulation. This view is continued with the conviction that the industry does not, and will not openly embrace corporate responsibility beyond that which returns a tangible financial profit. Certainly this view is compounded by the fact that most sustainable tourism and ecotourism quality assurance tools have a one-sided focus on environmental issues, particularly the use of energy, potable water and waste management. The reduction of energy and water consumption and minimization of waste may well limit consumption of scarce resources, but the resultant eco-efficiencies also result in considerable costs savings. These are estimated by WTO (2002) to be up to 20%.

Although there is an argument that ‘the ends should not justify the means’, the fact is that some of these initiatives are positive and beneficial, and result in better knowledge on how to apply sustainability principles ensuring there are wins for the environment, local community and the economy. It may be that

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the ecotourism industry is not as bad as it has been painted, or perhaps it is simply waking up to the fact that becoming more environmentally and socially responsible and embracing the tenets of quality ecotourism simply translates to plain business sense.

We are not going to provide excuses or answers to these conundrums, but hope that the stories from a range of sectors industry (albeit from three very different perspectives in Chapters 20, 21, 22) will speak for themselves and whether the ecotourism industry can uniformly be tarred with the same brush. The perspectives of ecotourism operators to sustainable tourism initiatives in New Zealand, a region blessed with a 'green and clean' image and trying to live up to the successful marketing campaign of '100% Pure' raises some interesting issues in Chapter 20. The author of Chapter 21, an ecolodge architect reviews four different existing ecotourism certification programs that include criteria for ecotourism accommodation and concludes by suggesting the need for an internationally recognised certification program specifically for ecolodges. We also hear from arguably one of the most successful ecotourism certification programs, the Australian EcoCertification Program (NEAP) 'developed by industry -for industry' through the eyes of a former program assessor (Chapter 22) who was involved in delivering the program. This chapter provides an insight into the development of the program and identifies key changes introduced as a result of experience, the in-built demand for continuous improvement, internal politics and external pressure and forces.

Protected area managers perspectives

Protected areas are often the life-blood for ecotourism. The very attributes for which they are gazetted – high natural scenic values, unique endemic flora and fauna, distinctive landscapes or landforms are also the basic raw materials for ecotourism. Protected area managers' views on quality ecotourism are relevant not only because the areas they manage are the favoured location for ecotourism activities, but also because they also present the park through their own ecotourism activities and events such as education programs and interpretation in visitor centres, brochures, signage, or guided walks and talks with rangers.

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Protected areas are 'honey pots', attracting tourism to their special or outstanding natural and cultural resources. It is not surprising then, that many protected areas are coming under increasing pressure and experiencing negative impacts through sheer numbers of tourists (Wearing and Neil, 1999; Butler and Boyd, 2000; Weaver, 2001). Protected area managers face a difficult task in balancing the need for conservation of the resource with their secondary directive of allowing access and opportunities for recreation.

Despite these problems, tourism has been heralded not only as the bane, but also the possible saviour of protected areas. In these times of increasing financial stringency and the general trend towards user-pays, ecotourism, with its fundamental precept and promise of returns to conservation, is an ideal sponsor. Harnessing the potential of ecotourism to deliver significant benefits to conservation and protected areas does not rely on just collecting entrance fees. In-kind support through help with maintenance, feral animal and weed control, revegetation and regeneration projects and collaborative printing of brochures are just a few of the mechanisms that can be increasingly seen around the world. Protected areas are also often forced through reduced budgets to rely more and more on tour operators to present the conservation values of the area to visitors. Evidence also suggests that protected areas are becoming increasingly dependent on tourism to generate operating revenue (Weaver, 2001; Fennell, 2003).

Protected area managers have a strong interest in quality ecotourism particularly to ensure their visitors minimise their negative impacts on the park, whilst maximising their positive returns. In Australia, a number of protected area management agencies are using the quality assurance tool of EcoCertification as a tool for filtering or selecting appropriate tourism products and raising industry standards. Since 2004, the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority has given extended permits of 15 years to appropriately certified tour operators, and Conservation and Land Management in Western Australia gives preferential access to operators who hold 'Advanced Ecotourism' level of EcoCertification. The involvement of protected area managers in ensuring quality ecotourism is explored in more depth in Chapters 15 and 16. Chapter 15 presents the perspective of a protected area manager who uses Western Australia as a case study to explore

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the issues surrounding the use and application of various tourism certification programs in the context of protected areas. Chapter 16 discusses the Protected Area Network (PAN) of Parks, a program that aims to create a network of European wilderness protected areas with a reliable trademark this guarantees nature protection and some of the issues surrounding its development and implementation.

Summary

Ecotourism involves many stakeholders often with differing interests and motivations and frequently looking for different outcomes from ecotourism. Any discussion of ecotourism and quality in ecotourism needs to recognize the range of stakeholders' views and try to meet and balance their individual needs, demands and interests.

Part Two of this book presents a range of key stakeholders' perspectives that we hope will highlight some of the key issues and challenges faced by ecotourism stakeholders in addressing, developing and implementing quality in ecotourism.

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