

# **Exploring the Role of Public Policy in Promoting Holistic Ecotourism**

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*Eco-tourism is a growing industry that can potentially become a victim of its own success. This paper posits a model that incorporates social marketing, public policy, and industry mandates in an effort to understand how tourism consumer behavior can be made more sustainable. The concept presented builds on work by Weaver (2005) that recommends advocates of sustainable eco-tourist behavior use increased information combined with holistic experiences to help consumers achieve deep understandings of their destinations and the impact their behavior has on the eco-system.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

The tourism industry is a business sector that has great economic potential. It has global influence and is directly linked to over 50 other economic sectors (de Jesus, 2010). Tourism is not only an important to developing nations that depend on it for foreign exchange earnings (United Nations World Tourism Organization [UNWTO], 2012), but it also has social impact on how societies communicate, travel, and develop their cities (de Jesus, 2010). As a key component of the world economy, tourism is expected to grow to 1.6 billion in international arrivals in 2020, up from 903 million in 2007 (UNWTO, 2012). With continuous growth in the tourism sector over the last several decades, many have become concerned with the negative environmental and social outcomes associated with this trend. This concern has contributed to the prevalence of various forms of sustainable tourism, including ecotourism.

While many definitions of ecotourism exist, The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) defines ecotourism as: “responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people” (TIES, 2012). According to Lu and Stepchenkova (2012), ecotourism accounts for 5-10% of the global travel market and is one of the fastest-growing subsectors within the tourism industry, with an annual growth rate of 5% worldwide. Academics and practitioners acknowledge that ecotourism has the potential to contribute to environmental, social/cultural and financial sustainability (Kruger, 2005; Ormsby and Mannle, 2006), and many countries around the world are involved in this sector.

Honey (2006) proposes that overall, a properly executed ecotourism program will benefit the environment through protection and improvement, benefit the destination community, and benefit the tourists themselves. These three goals of ecotourism are not based on just profitability, and the tourism industry is pushing for more sustainable tourism practices via declarations from the United Nations World

Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2002) and certifications (UNWTO, 2003) that encourage measurement of a program's environmental, social, and financial outcomes.

## **PURPOSE**

Despite the growth of ecotourism, the literature is replete with debates, challenges, and critical questions about the true sustainability of the ecotourism sector. The impact of large numbers of travelers to protected areas, their effect on wildlife and natural surroundings, as well as socio-cultural issues associated with indigenous peoples living in ecotourism destinations are just some of the relevant concerns. In fact, Weaver (2005, p. 450) argues that “contemporary ecotourism is largely incapable of fulfilling its potential to achieve meaningful environmental and sociocultural sustainability” and contrasts the minimalist view on ecotourism with the comprehensive view.

The purpose of this study is to build on the research of Weaver (2005) and related literature and explore the factors impacting more sustainable and comprehensive approaches to ecotourism, or “holistic” ecotourism. The goal of the study is to provide a preliminary framework for understanding *how* “holistic” ecotourism can be accomplished by examining two vital antecedents or influences.

## **LITERATURE OVERVIEW AND MODEL DEVELOPMENT**

### **Conceptualizing Ecotourism**

Tourism can have a significant positive impact on a community, and there may be some negative or unintended consequences associated with tourism success that diminish social, cultural, or environmental resources over time. A key component of ecotourism is sustainability, and it is this perspective that drives the type of planning and development of natural resources, economic incentives, and social incentives for destination locations. It also allows for a framework of activities to be developed that provides for use of the environment and sharing of the resulting benefits with the local and regional community (de Jesus, 2010). Given this goal to increase the benefits of tourism, yet reduce the negative and unintended consequences of having a popular tourist destination, de Jesus (2010) proposes that ecotourism should have a positive contribution to the local economy and environment, develop the resources equitably, enhance the lives of the destination population, provide tourists quality experiences (that include some form of educational experience), and impact the natural environment and indigenous culture as little as possible. (de Jesus, 2010).

According to Weaver (2005), there are two “types” of ecotourism, based on key characteristics related to objectives and outcomes. Weaver (2005) notes that under the minimalist view of ecotourism, the emphasis is on maintenance of the status-quo, the sustainability objectives focus on a specific site, and the learning opportunities are superficial. In contrast, Weaver (2005) identifies the comprehensive model, which takes a complete and fully global approach to developing, managing and promoting ecotourism destinations – one that cultivates opportunities for deep understanding of the ecotourism destination, transformation of behavior, and environmental and socio-cultural enhancement (not just conservation). While Weaver (2005) identifies these three elements as necessary in comprehensive ecotourism (termed “holistic ecotourism” here), his research did not identify/analyze influences on these elements. This study seeks to accomplish that in the following paragraphs, which provide an overview of the role of public policy in this realm. It should be noted that an additional element of Weaver’s comprehensive ecotourism model is a global approach. Clearly, this is an important factor given the international scope of ecotourism; however for the sake of brevity, it will be examined in a future study, which will provide for much more extensive research.

### **Public Policy - Social Marketing**

With one of the goals of ecotourism being to increase the adoption of sustainable travel behaviors by tourists, one approach to helping consumers develop/exhibit behaviors that enhance ecotourism destinations is through the use of social marketing. Lee and Kotler (2011, p. 26) define social marketing

as "the use of marketing principles and techniques to influence a target audience to voluntarily accept, reject, modify, or abandon a behavior for the benefit of individuals, groups, or society as a whole".

Often it is difficult to modify individual consumer behavior even though overall consumers believe that the behavior change will be beneficial. Social marketing strategies can provide necessary information and a sense of legitimacy than help activate the new behaviors that are desired by the marketing organization (Fox and Kotler, 1980) in order to promote their socially beneficial agenda.

The traditional marketing mix of product, place, price, and promotion (McCarthy, 1960) is also used in social marketing to assist in changing consumer consumption behavior. In the case of social marketing, the products are the new ideas or behaviors the marketer wants adopted (Kurtz and Boone, 1987), the prices includes the monetary, social, and opportunity costs of adopting the new behavior (see e.g. Shrum et al., 1994). The place and promotion refer to the information channels and methods used to communicate the new ideas and expected behaviors which, in a tourism context, can include travel agents, transportation providers, and attraction management personnel. Kotler (1983) has recommended that this mix be extended to include partnerships, because some organizations may not have the resources or scale to make a significant impact alone, because policy, legislative, regulatory, or other structural changes may be needed to create the necessary incentive for behavior change.

The task of implementing effective social marketing programs is not a simple one even if all of the marketing mix elements are utilized. The effort requires substantial resources – both human and financial, and therefore many tourism entities are too small to make a significant impact individually (Dinan and Sargeant, 2000). Consequently, public sector social marketing or social marketing via public-private partnerships could be put into place with government agencies collaborating with a wide range of tourism entities to promote "holistic" ecotourism. A successful example of the former is the Australian Commonwealth Department of Tourism's "Go Wild Wisely" campaign (Blamey and Braithwaite, 2010).

The premise behind the proposed research model is that (potential) tourists can only develop a deep understanding of ecotourism destinations, and their own role in enhancing economic, environmental and socio-cultural sustainability when they have access to complete and accurate information. Further, access to this information and enhanced knowledge is also considered a precursor to behavior changes (e.g., Joergens, 2006; Skanavis and Sarri, 2002).

When applying the concept of social marketing to ecotourism, Dinan and Sargeant (2000) assert that the sector should work at targeting the "right" travelers, those consumers who are both economically viable and receptive to the messages intended to encourage their adoption of sustainable behaviors (Dinan and Sargeant, 2000).

### **Public Policy – Mandates**

According to Lee and Kotler (2011), the most challenging aspect of social marketing is that its success is contingent upon individuals' voluntary adoption of the desired behavior(s). Consequently, in certain circumstances, it is necessary for government agencies at various levels to intervene in ecotourism matters to ensure that destinations are developed, managed, and maintained in a manner that is economically, environmentally, and socio-culturally sustainable, and that visitors engage in behaviors that enhance the ecotourism system. It is commonly argued that governments should assume a key role in advancing sustainable tourism (including ecotourism) by creating policies, providing incentives and developing regulations (Sofield, 2003; Nicholas, et al., 2009).

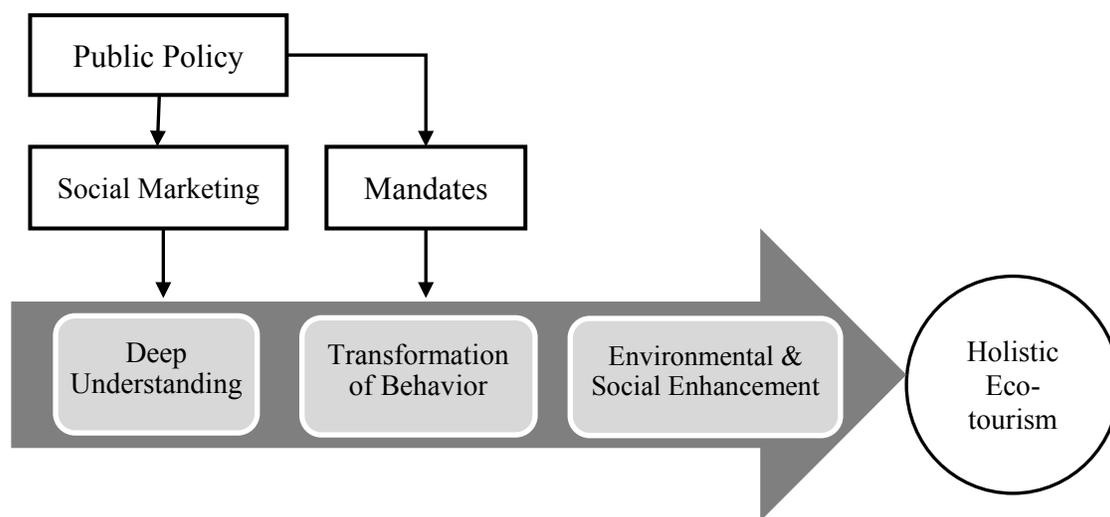
In 2007, an international group of sustainable tourism experts met to review global progress and develop suggestions for the future given the imperative of climate change and increased global travel (Gossling, et al., 2008). This effort is another example of organizations, industry-based or government entities, seeking to develop tourism strategies that address social issues, regulatory change, technology and product innovation, and even the impact of transportation modes on energy consumption (Gossling, et al., 2008).

Further, Doremus (2003) notes that ecological conservation often requires the enforcement of limits on human actions with governmental mandates, prohibitions, or restrictions on the manner in which certain activities can take place and consequences for violation (e.g., the establishment of the US

Endangered Species Act). From these examples it can be implied that tourism industry, tourism scholars, and government agencies believe that in addition to the social marketing strategies discussed above, enforceable guidelines will be an important part of developing sustainable tourism.

The research model, which is based on existing literature, appears in Figure 1. It is posited that public policy will positively influence various elements of the environment and society in ecotourism destinations, directly through mandates and indirectly through social marketing efforts. This model represents a starting point in understanding how the factors that impact various attractions' and destinations' move toward "holistic" ecotourism. Early testing of the model will involve conducting case studies to understand the role of these public policies in practice and will require participation on the part of various stakeholders, including government agencies, eco-tourists, tourism entities, and local residents.

**FIGURE 1  
RESEARCH MODEL**



### **DEEP (CONSUMER) UNDERSTANDING AND CONNECTION TO BEHAVIOR**

According to Weaver (2005), the eco-tourism "product" can be placed along a continuum. Products that focus on elements of an eco-system such as Chinese Pandas or Australian Koalas (Kontoleon, Swanson, Wang, Xuejun, and Yang, 2002) are at one end, and products that focus on the ecosystem of an area, such as a coral reefs or short-grass prairies (Weaver 2005) on the other. The products that are focused on the eco-systems can be thought of as being "holistic" in that they drive experiences for the consumer that incorporates the entire eco-system as one entity.

In order to develop behaviors in consumers that are more conducive to the goals of sustainable tourism, Weaver (2005) suggests consumers should be provided learning opportunities as part of their product experience. These learning opportunities can vary in intensity and formality, ranging from suggestive signs to lectures and printed materials. Regardless of the formality of the information presentation, learning opportunities that provide a "deep understanding" of the impact of tourist behavior on the eco-system being visited can have a transformative effect and encourage more sustainable behaviors by the tourist (Fennell, 1995, 1999; Tisdell and Wilson, 2001). These transformative learning opportunities should provide information that is focused on themes that drive a holistic view of the eco-tourist and their role in environmental and cultural sustainability of the product (Ham, 1992; Ham and Krumpel, 1996; Weiler and Ham, 2001) being consumed.

It is thought that increasing public knowledge about sustainable behaviors will increase sustainable behaviors (Devine-Wright, 2004). With regards to the travel literature, there are additional authors that suggest that there is a connection between increased consumer knowledge and pro-environmental behavior. Dolnicar, Couch, and Long (2008), Johnson (2006), Amendah and Park (2008), and Lee and Moscardo (2005) all posit a connection between the awareness and knowledge of consumers and a change in behaviors related to environmental intentions. Research done by Harriot (2002) shows that tourists to the Great Barrier Reef indicate that their consumption decisions would have been different had they been better informed about the impact of their behavior on the environment.

Miller et al. (2010) found that the consumer connections between tourism and the environment were low because popular behaviors such as water or energy conservation were “not considered relevant to tourism”. These results are consistent with work done by Becken (2007), Bohler, et al. (2006), and Gossling et al. (2006) which all indicate a low consumer understanding of tourism’s impact on the environment. Miller et al. (2010) also found that consumers knew what pro-environmental behaviors were and even recognized some of the financial benefits, but with respect to tourism, they were unsure of how to implement the behaviors in a way that they thought effective or financially beneficial.

Although research shows that consumers have a lack of information with respect to behavior impacts on tourist destinations, a simple increase in information will not achieve the desired behavior change (Miller et al., 2010). In addition to “static” data meant to inform about general behavior impacts, feedback that provides a more tacit connection between behavior and environmental outcomes can be an effective tool for initiating behavior change. These connections can be manifest through consumer incentives designed to “reward” desired behavior, or through social experiences designed to develop social norms related to the desired behaviors (Olli, Grendstad, and Wollebaek, 2001).

## **ENVIRONMENTAL AND SOCIAL ENHANCEMENT**

The social experiences that some use to develop social norms and increase desired behaviors among tourism consumers involve tourists getting “hands on” with making a direct impact on the destination ecosystem. The practice of ecological restoration (ER) is a strategy used by managers of tourist destinations to get visitors involved in reducing or correcting the adverse impact of tourist accommodations and infrastructure (Mehta, 2006). This strategy is particularly desirable in that it addresses some of the key goals of eco-tourism – financial viability, protecting the environment and local cultures, and a rewarding learning opportunity for tourists (Honey, 1999; Kruger, 2005). Companies that specialize in ER tours are increasingly joining with environmentalist to design and implement programs incorporating the eco-tourist as part of an environmental solution (Irwin, 1995). These tours are also vehicles for providing the tourist with conservation-focused messages (Campbell and Smith, 2006) and experiences tourists need to get the deep understanding suggested by Weaver (2005).

## **SUMMARY**

The growth of eco-tourism has sparked a debate about the sustainability of an industry that inherently increases its impact on the environment and societies it touches simply through its success. In order to reduce the negative consequences of eco-tourism, Weaver (2005) suggests that solutions have a holistic point of view, provide opportunities for tourists to develop understanding of the destination that leads to transforming behaviors, and incorporate some sort of management that addresses the adverse effects of increased tourism. By incorporating these three tenets, one can get closer to implementing holistic eco-tourism. The model presented in this paper discusses how public policy and social marketing can be leveraged to develop a framework that can help tourism practitioners and tourism scholars develop strategies that enhance the sustainability of holistic eco-tourism. More research is needed to better understand the interaction of information, behavior change, and consumer experience to determine their effects on consumer desire to be more environmentally conscious.

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