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SUSTAINABLE MANAGEMENT OF ECOTOURISM

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CONCEPTS OF SUSTAINABILITY

Sustainability has become an attractive ideal for both scientists and activists, but operational details, objectives, or actions provided by advocates are scarce. The sustainability debate involves “how to pursue the goal and how to measure progress toward it.” Sustainability was originally a biophysical concept that is now being applied in a social and policy context, contributing to confusion about what is to be sustained and for whom. For example, by sustainability do we mean sustaining physical outputs, such as board feet of timber or room occupancy, or do we mean the ecological patterns and processes that maintain naturally occurring ecosystems? Or by sustainability are we concerned with the ongoing social, political, and cultural processes that give communities character and individuals security?

Tourism is only part of the whole idea of sustainable development. Tourism, as it relates to sustainable development, is developed so that the nature, scale, location, and manner of development is appropriate and sustainable over time. Since tourism cannot be isolated from other resource use activities, the environment’s ability to support other activities and processes is not impaired. Sustainable tourism involves a challenge to develop quality tourism products without adversely affecting the natural and cultural environment that maintains and nurtures them. At the heart of sustainable tourism is a set of implicit values related to striving to integrate economic, social and cultural goals.

Traditionally, tourism had been viewed by industry and governments purely in economic terms, that is, as a way to add revenue and generate employment opportunities. However, in recent times a new paradigm has occurred which fosters awareness of two other aspects of development, the social and environmental dimensions. This new direction embraces a sustainable approach to development which underpins the new way of doing business in the 21st century. Such an approach includes economics, social and environmental considerations. Any business must include all three dimensions if it is to succeed in the rapidly changing business environments of cost efficiencies, customer service and shareholder’s satisfaction.

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The strength of sustainable tourism is that it incorporates social and environmental aspects as well as the traditional economic approach to development in order to form a much stronger ‘triangular’ approach to doing business. By taking this approach we can actively empower ourselves, our positions and our companies to make money whilst working to enhance our communities and the environment. This is the legacy of sustainable tourism which is an approach to all types of tourism development.

Sustainable tourism allows visitors to enjoy an attraction, community or region with a volume and impact in such a way that the local culture and environment are unimpaired. Strictly speaking, tourism and recreation use always lead to some level of impairment in natural systems.

The question is primarily how much change is acceptable. Tourism industry
should care both for visitors and for the places they visit: "the communities in which we live." Clearly, researchers view sustainability as more than physical commodities from natural ecosystems.

Despite the extensive discussion about sustainability since the 1987 report from the World Commission on Environment and Development, which popularized the issue, few answers have been found. Entering sustainability-based management is essentially a value judgment, a decision that says that current management is inadequate or inappropriate.

Sustainability is a concept decision makers can use to assess the consequences of actions on human communities. A human focus is deliberately taken here because it is the human population that places values on social structure, cultural values and traditions, economic opportunity, and ecosystems and their species. Maintenance of ecosystems and the protection of individual species are human-based values and, therefore, can be described from only a human viewpoint.

Human communities are impacted in a variety of ways by tourism, including social structure and function, cohesiveness, economic and educational opportunity, community stability, provision of and payment for services (police protection, fire), physically (architecture, location and design of highways), competition in access to recreation opportunities and other services, and interaction with the natural environment and the noncommodity values it produces. The general concept is that sustainability is not only a goal for specific industries, but it is also an objective for the human communities that benefit and that are impacted from various economic development scenarios. Industry sustainability goals are most likely physical output or net revenue goals, such as board feet of timber, room-nights occupancy, and skier visits. These sustainability goals, however, may not achieve broader community sustainability goals, goals that may be difficult to quantify and measure.

CONCLUSION

In a market driven environment, what the ecotourism industry needs and the public must demand is a ruler for measuring the impact of tourism on natural resources. Ensuring that nature based tourism establishes and maintains high standards will be a challenge for all the management. The management of sensitive ecosystems in the ecotourism context can one way protect a country’s heritage and make it available for local education and tourism. The investment in such facilities is usually repaid through tourists who come in larger numbers and stay longer because there are more things to see and do and at the same time be enthused that the sustainability of the site has been looked into. The environment is the resource base for tourism; without protection, the natural attraction that brought the tourist in the first place will be lost.

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THE TOURISM CHALLENGE

The tourism industry is confronted with serious and difficult choices about its future. The decisions made now will for decades affect the lifestyles and economic opportunity of residents in tourism destination areas. Many of these decisions are irreversible because once communities lose the character that makes them distinctive and attractive to non-residents, they have lost their ability to vie for tourist-based income in an increasingly global and competitive marketplace.

Worldwide, tourism is undergoing fundamental change, from the experiences and settings travelers demand to the regulations governments impose to protect the environment. Signs of these shifts are everywhere, from tourism industry statements on the value of the environment to the demand for ecotourism. This transformation of demand and values leaves the industry no alternative other than to pursue a different, yet difficult, course one that builds upon the key questions of purpose, objectives, values, and strategies.

Decisions about tourism development are difficult. The fundamental questions they imply such as the visions we have for our communities, how changes brought about by development will impact those visions, and how the community can absorb such changes have largely been ignored in the past. These decisions are controversial because they will prevent or diminish some traditional uses of natural resources and affect the people who have or who might have benefited from those uses. Powerful economic forces entrenched in the current direction are reluctant to open dialogue. The decisions are essentially judgments reflecting divergent value systems and how those value systems will be integrated.

Our clients, primarily the public, are communicating through changes in tastes and preferences and, consequently, they are demanding that the industry pursue sustainability and care of the environment. We need to systematically explore the linkage that exists, whether recognized or not, between tourism, the environment, and sustainability.