Texchem Resources: A MODEL EMPLOYER

Economy 2003-2004: What are the Prospects?

Business Abroad: India Beckons

DiGi Telecom: Blueprint for the Future

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Ensuring that nature-based tourism maintains high standards is a challenge for all.

What the industry needs and the public must demand is a measuring scale to evaluate the impact of tourism on natural resources. Although there can be many motives for a trip, travellers are not in the habit of conducting an environmental impact assessment for each part. Eventually we can define the different types of tourism and the impacts they cause. A measurement scale can be put in place to define the level of compliance to the ecotourism principles.

John Shores in 1999 in his research, “The Challenge of Ecotourism: A Call for High Standards”, proposed a scale for classifying nature-based travel. The scale measures the level of achievement according to the principles of ecotourism.

The scale is not strictly cumulative. Different levels of the ecotourism scale in some cases measure different attributes rather than increasing or decreasing amounts of the same attribute. For example, Level 1 involves net financial flow of support from the traveller to the site visited. Level 2 involves a separate attribute, personal commitment. The scale is still in a preliminary phase of development and is presented as an example of the kind of cooperative effort that will involve travellers, tour operators, local communities, and environmentalists. The ecotourism level proposed by John Shores included the following (Table 1):

Level 5 should be the ultimate goal for ecotourism supporters, whether they are tour operators, the travelling public, or the resource management agencies. No deluge of third-class mail solicitations, no advertising in non-recyclable magazines. Transportation must be environmentally benign (no Concorde, limited use of petroleum products - in fact, maybe only solar and animal transport would qualify, other than...
very different from the next group. Promoting dialogue and facilitating conflict reduction will be continuous challenges. Providing independent analysis of official data, and independent data collection when the official data is in question, are also roles for the environmental organizations.

REFLECTIONS
Ensuring that nature-based travel establishments and maintains high standards will be a challenge for all parties. The roles are different for each player, but together they can find the ecologically sensitive and economically viable methods and practices that will ensure survival of the attractions of nature and culture, without harming the resources. These endeavours will be worthy of the label "ecotourism" at Level 4 and 5 as proposed by John Shores and EC04 and 5 of the ESRG rating, and the travellers who participate will be true ecotourists. Will the parties see their ways to adhere to the highest principles and standards of ecotourism? Or will mass tourism overtake the site and result in the demise of this goose that lays golden eggs. The choice is ours to make, as travellers and as stewards for this Earth.

A prospective visitor to this site has the right to know in advance before they decide to visit the place. The internet-based ecotourism-site rating expert system provides the rating of an ecotourism site based on the definition of an ecotourism site, and the level of safety, health and environment of the ecotourism site. This rating system takes into consideration many types of ecotourism categories, facilities and activities available at ecotourism sites in Malaysia.

Easily accessibility through Internet, transparency of the rating, accountability of a person who use the system, and the incorporation of knowledge from domain experts and field data are the strength of this rating system. New knowledge and information could easily be incorporated into the system.

As the concept of ecotourism becomes increasingly popular, a need has emerged for both standards and procedures of monitoring compliance with these standards. Such standards and monitoring procedures can distinguish valid ecotourism projects from the many enterprises that have appropriated the ecotourism label without real commitment to its principles. They are also necessary to help honest ecotourism projects criticise their performance and move closer to the ideal of sustainability.

The ecotourism attraction must satisfy all the requirements of safety, health and environmental legislation and codes. The tourist attraction is to be preserved in its natural state and provisions must be put in place to sustain the environment. Signage and interpretive media (general information about the attraction) must be prominently placed and tourist properly informed about the facility. On arrival at the attraction, tourist should be given verbal presentations and written material on health, safety, and environmental rules and regulations. The ecotourism definition must be well understood by the management and made understood to the tourist.

Self-monitoring systems should be put in place to measure the level of guest satisfaction. It is desirable that evaluation forms be made available to guests for them to record their criticisms, complaints and accolades. The responses would point to what needs and the public must demand is a ruler for measuring the impact of tourism on natural resources. Ensuring that nature based tourism establishments and maintains high standards will be a challenge for all parties.
walking and swimming). On-site accommodations and all visitor and staff activities must be benign to the environment. Heating and air-conditioning would be solar and low-impact. Foods and souvenirs would be produced in sustainable ways. All residual products would have to be handled in a benign way. Sewage containment and treatment would be an absolute requirement. Used products would be recycled, soaps and cleaning solutions would be biodegradable, and non-degradation of the environment would be the standard.

THE ECO-RATING SCALE
The compliance percentage ECO-rating scale developed by the Expert System Research Group's (ESRG) of Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) are translated into a 5-point cumulative rating scale. The weights for each compliance percentage vary from one level to another as shown in Figure 1. The weights for each compliance percentage are reset to zero at every level.

At Level 1, ECO-1 rating is awarded for compliance of more than 75%. Any compliance level that is less than 75% is not entitled to use this rating system and will be rejected by the system by ending the consultation.

At Level 2, ECO-2 rating is awarded for compliance of above 25% and 50%. Any compliance level that is less than 25% is not entitled to proceed further and will be awarded with ECO-1 before ending the consultation. ECO-3 rating is awarded for compliance of more than 50%. Any compliance level that is less than 50% is not entitled to proceed further and will be awarded with the ECO-2 before ending the consultation.

At Level 3, ECO-4 rating is awarded for compliance of above 25% and 50%. Any compliance level that is less than 25% is not entitled to proceed further and will be awarded with ECO-3 before ending the consultation.

ECO-5 is the highest rating awarded for compliance of more than 50%. Any compliance level that is less than 50% is not entitled to proceed further and will be awarded with the ECO-4 before ending the consultation.

As outlined in Figure 1, a successful rating can be accomplished in one of the 3 levels. The user can be awarded the rating from ECO-1 gradually to ECO-2 (Level 1) before terminating the rating. The user too can be rated from ECO-1 move directly to ECO-3 and then gradually to ECO-4 (Level 2). In the last type, the user can move directly from ECO-1 to ECO-3 to ECO-4 (Level 3).

THE ECOTOURISM CHALLENGE TO TOUR OPERATORS, PARK AGENCIES AND OTHERS
Tour operators and resource management agencies must come together to ensure eco-centric travel and use in national parks and their surrounding lands. Several efforts are needed. Park managers need to develop clear criteria for setting the limits of acceptable change for each ecosystem. Local communities, resource industries, tour operators, and national environmental organizations will each have viewpoints to consider. Tour operators need to learn enough about the ecosystems they visit to understand the need for restrictions and limits. This same information can be used to enrich the visitor experience as well.

Local communities need to be encouraged to take the long view in selecting a development path for their landscape and their economy. They may find partners in development and conservation by inviting the environmental groups to work with them to find solutions and the capital to make them happen.

Environmental organizations have the challenge of ensuring the objectiveness of the policy environment, where each interest group may hold a set of values.