

Redefining Ecotourism: The Need for a Supply-Side View

By: Ercan Sirakaya, Vinod Sasidharan, and [Sevil Sönmez](#)

Sirakaya, E., Sasidharan V., and S. Sönmez (1999). Redefining Ecotourism: The Need for a Supply Side View. *Journal of Travel Research*, 38(2):168-172.

Made available courtesy of Sage Publications: <http://www.sagepub.com/>

***** Note: Figures may be missing from this format of the document**

Abstract:

This article reviews the existing literature on ecotourism definitions and provides a supply-side view of ecotourism based on the findings of a nationwide survey of 282 U.S.- based ecotour operators. A content analysis of ecotourism definitions revealed that ecotourism is a new form of nonconsumptive, educational, and romantic tourism to relatively undisturbed and undervisited areas of immense natural beauty, and cultural and historical importance for the purposes of understanding and appreciating the natural and sociocultural history of the host destination. The current view of ecotourism by the sample of tour operators reflects and confirms definitions of ecotourism found in existing literature. If the definitions provided by this sample of ecotour operators are to be considered representative of their business vision or mission statement, it is plausible to expect their business objectives and operational behavior to be congruent with their description of ecotourism. Whether or not their actual behavior will reflect their visions remains to be determined.

Article:

Since the late 1980s, there has been a proliferation of ecotourism-related articles in professional journals. Although ecotourism research is now moving away from descriptive type of studies toward more rigorous and theory-based research (Malloy and Fennell 1998; Sirakaya and Uysal 1998; Sirakaya and McLellan 1998; Sirakaya 1997), there is still considerable debate about the normative (what it should be) and positive (what it is) definitions of ecotourism (Orams 1995, p. 3). The primary goal of this research note is to review and enhance the existing literature on ecotourism definitions by providing a supply-side view of ecotourism based on the findings of a nationwide survey of ecotour operators.

There is a plethora of ecotourism definitions or explanations of the same in the current literature. While not exhaustive in its domain, Table 1 illustrates the diversity of existing definitions and the concept of ecotourism. Although useful in enhancing the current understanding of ecotourism, many of these definitions are normative in nature and were formulated by conservationists, professional organizations, or by academicians on the basis of their observation (study) of tourist behavior. Accordingly, in defining ecotourism, conservationists and environmentalists may be expected to put heavy emphasis on preservation and conservation of the ecological assets of tourism and less weight on profit motivation of the private enterprise as well as the realities of the business environment (e.g., labor market, degree of linkages among economic sectors, global competition, bargaining power of major suppliers at tourist origins). In defining ecotourism, a professional organization such as the Ecotourism Society, the World Wildlife Fund, or the Audobon Society, on the other hand, may reflect the opinions of its members of whom many are conservationists or conservationists-turned tourism providers (e.g., the board of directors of the Ecotourism Society). According to the traditional utility maximization theory, the primary goal of a business is to maximize profits— even if they are to be gained through ecologically incompatible business practices. Hence, the profit goal may or may not be consistent with the context of current definitions of ecotourism. Indeed, there is growing evidence of negative impacts of ecotourism around the globe that seems to indicate business as usual, confirming the concerns raised by some tourism scholars (see Wight 1993; Butler 1991; Wheeler 1991). Ecotourism may be viewed as just another “buzzword” that serves as a marketing tool and allows tourism providers to take advantage of the new generation of mass travelers in search of unexplored natural and cultural beauty in unusual and remote destinations such as the Antarctic. Thus, what is really lacking is an understanding of the “supply-side” view including but not limited to the perspectives of

ordinary tour operators. Their view of ecotourism is likely to influence their day-to-day business operations at ecologically sensitive destinations and, consequently, the future of host communities as well as natural resources. Thus, the primary goal of this article is to enhance the body of existing literature on ecotourism definitions by providing a supply-side view that incorporates the perspectives of ecotour operators based on a nationwide research of ecotour operators.

TABLE 1
CONCEPT OF ECOTOURISM

Study	Description of the Concept
Ceballos-Lascurain (1987, p. 14)	Traveling to relatively undisturbed areas or uncontaminated natural areas with the specific objective of studying, admiring, and enjoying the scenery and its wild plants and animals, as well as any existing cultural manifestations (both past and present) found in these areas.
Butler (1989, pp. 9-17)	Ecotourism can be described as the type of tourism that is inherently sensitive to communication, awareness and environmental enhancement. These characteristics of ecotourism make it less likely to create social and environmental problems commonly associated with conventional tourism. Ecotourism attempts to give travelers a greater awareness of environmental systems and contribute positively to the destination's economic social and ecological conditions.
Fennell and Eagles (1989, pp. 23-24)	Ecotourism or nature-oriented travel . . . [is] a viable means to stimulate economy and at the same time to establish and maintain a system of protected areas . . . characterized by a primary desire to study specific elements of nature in sensitive environments . . . fulfilled by activities such as bird watching, whale viewing and wild-flower photography. The ecotourism industry involves the systematic development and marketing of nature-oriented travel packages. . . . Ecotourism thrives on three main components: the attraction of tourists to unique, accessible natural areas; the use of tourism as a tool in nature conservation through the generation of education, profits, changing attitudes, community development, and political priorities; the provision of employment and entrepreneurial opportunities for local people.
Kutay (1989, p. 30)	Ecotourism is a model of development in which natural areas are planned as part of the tourism base and biological resources are clearly linked to social economic sectors.
Ziffer (1989, p. 6)	A form of tourism inspired primarily by the natural history of an area, including its indigenous cultures. The ecotourist visits relatively undeveloped areas in the spirit of appreciation, participation, and sensitivity. The ecotourist practices a non-consumptive use of wildlife and natural resources and contributes to the visited area through labor or financial means aimed at directly benefiting the conservation of the site and the economic well-being of the local residents. Ecotourism also implies a managed approach by the host country or region which commits itself to establishing and maintaining the sites with the participation of local residents, marketing them appropriately, enforcing regulations, and using the proceeds of the enterprise to fund the area's land management as well as community development.
Ziolkowski (1990, p. 16)	Low-impact tourism . . . focuses on experiencing the local culture and what it has to offer on its own unadulterated terms . . . far from the proverbial "beaten track."
Boo (1991, pp. 4-8)	Ecotourism / nature-oriented tourism refers to tourism to relatively undisturbed natural areas with the specific objective of admiring, studying and enjoying the scenery and its flora and fauna.
Farrell and Runyan (1991, p. 34)	Focus on the environment in a special manner in which conservationists and tourist interests see the mutual advantages of working together to preserve environmental quality while mutually protecting tourism . . . nature conservation aided by cooperative strategies . . . a subset of nature tourism taken a step farther, with nature and tourism considered equal partners . . . exclusively purposeful and focused on the enhancement or maintenance of natural systems through tourism.
Place (1991, p. 189)	Gradual small-scale approach, based on local savings and investment . . . local participation may provide the opportunity to integrate conservation and economic development for park-based tourism development.
Hunt (1992, pp. 2-3)	Among the list of "neo-tourism" (new tourism initiatives, new players, new concerns, new approaches, new ideas and new terminology) activities is ecotourism. Eco/nature tourism is the result of a long overdue recognition that tourism, if properly developed and managed, can contribute to the protection and preservation of unique natural and cultural environments, rather than exploit them. Ecotourism advocates believe that there is a "kinder and gentler" tourism that does not necessarily require extensive and intensive development or environmentally or socially degrading activities.
Williams (1992, p. 15)	Ecotourism entails "travel with substance" [and involves] traveling in relatively primitive and rural circumstances, rustic accommodations, muddy trails, basic amenities, the pay-off being a stronger appreciation and closer contact with wildlife, local culture and resource conservation issues.
Brause (1992, p. 29)	Ecotourism suggests travel opportunities designed to help people get more in touch with the beauty, wonder, and value of the environment and then to do something to preserve, protect, or restore what has been destroyed or nearly destroyed by our recent (and, in some cases, distant) ancestors.

TABLE 1 Continued

Study	Description of the Concept
Western (1993, pp. 7-8)	Ecotourism is really an amalgam of interests arising out of environmental, economic and social concerns . . . incorporates both a strong commitment to nature and a sense of social responsibility . . . extends to the sensitivity of the travelers. The term "responsible travel," another aphorism for ecotourism, encapsulates its aims.
Agardy (1993, pp. 224-25)	Viewing wildlife (such as birds, sea turtles, and marine mammals), learning about coastal ecology (especially wetlands ecology), SCUBA diving or snorkeling in undisturbed areas, or to experience nature in its broadest sense.
Miller (1993, pp. 187-88)	Ecotourism has international currency as a concept grounded in preservation-conservation and sustainable development ideals. As the term has come to be employed, it evokes a host of near-synonyms . . . "equality tourism," "ethnic tourism," "cultural tourism," "socio-ecological tourism," "photo-safari tourism," "drive tourism," and "surfing tourism."
Valentine (1993, pp. 108-9)	New form of tourism . . . especially concerned with the appreciation of nature as the primary motive to participate, but with an essential element of zero negative impacts . . . based on relatively undisturbed natural areas, non-damaging, non-degrading, ecologically sustainable, a direct contributor to the continued protection and management of the natural areas used, subject to an adequate and appropriate management regime.
Wallace (1993, p. 40)	Providing assistance such as interpretation, resource inventory and monitoring, and visitor concession management—working effectively with local people who live in or near wildlands and cooperating with non-profits—everyone will benefit from viewing wilderness in the global context.
Wight (1993, p. 5)	An enlightening nature travel experience that contributes to conservation of the ecosystem, while respecting the integrity of host communities.
Andersen (1994, p. 32)	Ecotourism is a tourism experience infused with the spirit of conservation and cultural change that results in a net positive effect for the environment and local economy . . . may be part of an overall economic and environmental plan that includes sustainable agriculture, micro-industries and other activities . . . minimize the human intrusion on the ecosystem, to educate travelers and to enhance the spiritual experience in nature that fosters respect and stewardship.
Backman, Wright, and Backman (1994, p. 23)	In ecotourism . . . potentially peak experiences let us know we truly are alive—reawakening from our everyday lives, reawakening the spirit, allowing for those ever-seeking, enjoying, escaping, relating, discovering, fulfilling and self-discovering feelings—all within the confines of carefully chosen experience.
Buckley (1994, p. 664)	Integration of nature based products and markets, sustainable management to minimize impacts, financial support for conservation, and environmental attitudes and education of individual people.
Lindberg and Johnson (1994, p. 10)	Most concepts of ecotourism include the expectation that ecotourism development will benefit conservation.
Wall (1994, p. 7)	Ecotourism is usually used to refer to tourism which takes place in relatively natural settings or is directed at specific components of such settings including rare or endangered species of plants or animals. These locations are often at considerable distance from the areas of demand, the former often being in countries of the South whereas the ecotourists usually originate in the North . . . "economically viable tourism."
Place (1995, pp. 161-62)	Ecotourism represents a response to phenomena occurring in both center and periphery, deriving from the dominant global economic paradigm based on continuous growth . . . in the center, industrial and urban development caused destruction of natural ecosystems and degradation of the environment in general . . . in the periphery, stagnant or declining commodity prices and growing foreign debts forced governments to seek economic alternatives.
Kinnaird and O'Brien (1996, p. 72)	Ecotourism or nature tourism is implicitly assumed to have little or no impact on the environment . . . appears to be an ideal solution for combining goals of development and conservation.

The methodology of this study was extensively described elsewhere (see Sirakaya 1997). Briefly, a survey was undertaken to solicit the opinions of 282 U.S.-based ecotour operators (45% response rate without nonresponse bias). Executive managers and owners of these tour operations were asked to provide definitions of ecotourism and, subsequently, evaluate the fit of their company within their definition on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*not an ecotour operator*) to 5 (*very much of an ecotour operator*). The majority of tour operators (69.3%) indicated that their company fit well within their definition of ecotourism. Only 4.7% of respondent tour operators indicated that they were not ecotour operators or had little ecotourism business.

A content analysis of the ecotourism definitions revealed specific references to nearly 14 underlying themes (see Table 2). Ecotourism was most often associated with environmentally friendly, responsible travel, educational travel, low-impact travel, ecocultural tourism, sustainable/nonconsumptive tourism, and community involvement. One comprehensive definition by one of the tour operators sums up these perspectives.

TABLE 2
DEFINITIONS OF ECOTOURISM

Major Themes	Description of the Theme	Frequency
Environmental-friendly tourism	Tourism that is environmentally safe, minimizes impact on nature and wildlife, and contributes to environmental protection and dynamic conservation.	39
Responsible travel	Responsible tourism that respects the cultures, societies, ecology, and the natural environment.	28
Educational travel	Tourism that generates environmental awareness and imparts natural and cultural education to tour operators, tourists/guests/clients, and local inhabitants.	24
Low-impact travel	Nonimpact or low-impact tourism. Tread lightly, only photos, no collection, leave only footprints. Nonintrusive exploitation of natural resources.	20
Recreational and romantic trips to natural sites	Outdoor tour experience including the presentation and appreciation of natural wonders in areas of immense beauty such as visiting U.S. parks, that is, Yellowstone, Grand Canyon, Sonoma desert; or visiting international diving areas such as Red Sea, Brazil, Belize.	19
Contribution to local welfare	Tourism that produces economic (monetary profits and job opportunities) and social benefits to local people.	14
Ecocultural travel	Touring areas of cultural and historical importance (seeing other cultures in natural areas) focusing on natural history and local culture.	10
Sustainable/nonconsumptive tourism	Tourism that includes sustained conservation of resources in a non-consumptive manner for future generations through the controlled use and management of cultural and environmental resources.	6
Responsible-business approach to travel	New tourism involving companies that are sensitive to environmental concerns and take stand on issues; companies that try to operate in an ecological sense; companies that promote ecologically correct awareness; travel companies that support the use of the target country's operators' lodging, guides, and so on.	5
Community involvement	New form of tourism that encourages active involvement of the local population.	5
Tourist involvement in preservation	Tourism that promotes interaction with the natural environment while encouraging tourists to actively preserve.	4
Buzzword	Politically loaded buzzword, being politically correct, a marketing ploy.	4
Contribution to conservation	Tourism that contributes to nonprofit conservation organizations.	2

Ecotourism is ... carefully planned tourist activity (whether natural, historical, botanical, ornithological, or archaeological tours) that it is compatible with sound ecological principles. Ecotourism results in no ecological damage from group impact on national parks and/or natural history resources. It is the philosophy of travel companies to support/use the destination's local resources, operators, lodging, guides, and other tourist facilities or services and of showing evidence of continued support for the destination's conservation/preservation program and long-term planning.

The plethora of perspectives converge to make a distinct point: ecotourism is a new form of nonconsumptive, educational, and romantic tourism to relatively undisturbed and undervisited areas of immense natural beauty, and cultural and historical importance for the purposes of understanding and appreciating the natural and sociocultural history of the host destination. It is a form of tourism that is expected to result in (1) minimal

negative impacts on the host environment; (2) an increased contribution to environmental protection and dynamic conservation of resources; (3) the creation of necessary funds to promote sustained protection of ecological and sociocultural resources; (4) the enhancement of interaction, understanding, and coexistence between the visitors and locals; and (5) a contribution to the economic (monetary profits and job opportunities) and social wellbeing of the local people. Thus, ecotourism is based on the sustained conservation of resources in a nonconsumptive manner involving nonintrusive exploitation of natural resources through the controlled use and management of cultural and environmental resources for the future. Ecotourism incorporates the coexistence and interaction of the natural environment and people (tourists and local inhabitants) and encourages the active involvement of tourists and the local population in preservation efforts.

Ecotourism has also been described as a small-group “appropriate travel,” “socially responsible tourism” involving soft-adventure travel that advises tourists to “tread lightly, take only photographs and leave only footprints.” Companies genuinely focusing on ecotourists plan and conduct natural, historical, botanical, ornithological, or archaeological tours that are compatible with sound ecological principles to avoid disturbance or damage to the social and physical environment. Ideally, these companies will demonstrate sensitivity to environmental concerns and issues, try to operate within the framework of ecological guidelines, promote an ecologically correct awareness, and support/use local tourism services (i.e., lodging, guides), practice long-term planning, and continue to support destination communities’ conservation/preservation programs. According to tour operators, ecotourism also includes involvement after travel to inspire personal responsibility. Only a small fraction of tour operators considered ecotourism as a buzzword used as a marketing ploy or a political tool. In sum, the current view of ecotourism by the sample of tour operators reflects and confirms definitions of ecotourism found in existing literature. From a management perspective, if the definitions provided by this sample of ecotour operators are to be considered representative of their business vision or mission statement, it is plausible to expect their business objectives and operational behavior to be congruent with their description of ecotourism. Whether or not their actual behavior will reflect their visions remains to be determined. Nevertheless, further research in the area of monitoring, compliance, and enforcement is needed if ecotourism is to remain a profitable and sustainable business.

REFERENCES

- Agardy, M. T. (1993). “Accommodating Ecotourism in Multiple Use Planning of Coastal and Marine Protected Areas.” *Ocean and Coastal Management*, 20 (3): 219-39.
- Andersen, D. L. (1994). “Developing Ecotourism Destinations: Conservation from the Beginning.” *Trends*, 31 (2): 31-38.
- Backman, K. F., B. A. Wright, and S. J. Backman (1994). “Ecotourism: A Short Descriptive Exploration.” *Trends*, 31 (2): 23-27.
- Boo, E. (1991). “Planning for Ecotourism.” *Parks*, 2 (3): 4-8.
- Brause, D. (1992). “The Challenge of Ecotourism: Balancing Resources, Indigenous People, and Tourists.” *Transitions Abroad*, November-December: 29-31.
- Buckley, R. (1994). “A framework for Ecotourism.” *Annals of Tourism Research*, 21 (3): 661-69.
- Butler, R. (1989). “Alternative Tourism: Pious Hope or Trojan Horse?” *World Leisure and Recreation*, 31 (4): 9-17.
- (1991). “Tourism, Environment and Sustainable Tourism Development.” *Tourism Management*, 18: 201-9.
- Ceballos-Lascurain, H. (1987). “The Future of Ecotourism.” *Mexico Journal*, January: 13-14.
- Farrell, B. H., and D. Runyan (1991). “Ecology and Tourism.” *Annals of Tourism Research*, 18 (1): 26-40.
- Fennell, D., and P.F.J. Eagles (1989). “Ecotourism in Costa Rica: A Conceptual Framework.” *Journal of Parks and Recreation Administration*, 8 (1): 23-34.
- Hunt, J. D. (1992). “Rural Tourism: New Focus on a Traditional Industry.” *Western Wildlands*, 18 (3): 2-3.
- Kinnaird, M. F., and T. G. O’Brien (1996). “Ecotourism in Tangkoko Dwasudara Nature Reserve: Opening Pandora’s Box.” *Oryx*, 30 (1): 65-73.
- Kutay, K. (1989). “The New Ethic in Adventure Travel.” *Buzzworm: The Environmental Journal*, 1 (4): 30-36.
- Lindberg, K., and R. L. Johnson (1994). “Estimating Demand for Ecotourism Sites in Developing Nations.” *Trends*, 31 (2): 10-15.

- Malloy, D. C., and D. A. Fennell (1998). "Ecotourism and Ethics: Moral Development and Organizational Culture." *Journal of Travel Research*, 36 (4): 47-56.
- Miller, M. (1993). "The Rise of Coastal and Marine Tourism." *Ocean & Coastal Management*, 20 (3): 181-99.
- Orams, M. B. (1995). "Towards a More Desirable Form of Ecotourism." *Tourism Management*, 16 (1): 3-8.
- Place, S. (1991). "Nature Tourism and Rural Development in Tortugero." *Annals of Tourism Research*, 18 (2): 186-201.
- (1995). "Ecotourism for Sustainable Development: Oxymoron or Plausible Strategy?" *Geojournal*, 35(2): 161.
- Sirakaya, E. (1997). "Attitudinal Compliance with Ecotourism Guidelines." *Annals of Tourism Research*, 24 (4): 919-50.
- Sirakaya, E., and R. W. McLellan (1998). "Modeling Tour Operations Voluntary Compliance with Ecotourism Principles: A Behavioral Approach." *Journal of Travel Research*, 36 (3): 42-55.
- Sirakaya, E., and M. Uysal (1998). "Can Sanctions and Rewards Explain Conformance Behavior of Tour Operators with Ecotourism Guidelines?" *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 5 (4): 322-32.
- Valentine, P. S. (1993). "Ecotourism and Nature Conservation: A Definition with Some Recent Developments in Micronesia." *Tourism Management*, 14 (2): 107-15.
- Wall, G. (1994). "Ecotourism: Old Wine in New Bottles?" *Trends*, 31 (2): 4-9.
- Wallace, G. N. (1993). "Wildlands and Ecotourism in Latin America." *Journal of Forestry*, 91 (February): 37-40.
- Western, D. (1993). "Defining Ecotourism." In *Ecotourism: A Guide for Planners and Managers*, edited by K. Lindberg and D. E. Hawkins. North Bennington, VT: The Ecotourism Society, pp. 7-11.
- Wheeller, B. (1991). "Tourism's Troubled Times: Responsible Tourism is Not the Answer." *Tourism Management*, 12 (2): 91-96.
- Wight, P. (1993). "Ecotourism: Ethics or Eco-Sell?" *Journal of Travel Research*, 31 (3): 3-9.
- Williams, P. W. (1992). "A Local Framework for Ecotourism Development." *Western Wildlands*, 18 (3): 14-19.
- Ziffer, K. (1989). "Ecotourism: The Uneasy alliance." In *Conservation International*. Washington, DC: Ernst & Young, Working Papers on Ecotourism, pp. 1-36.
- Ziolkowski, H. (1990). "Ecotourism: Loving Nature on Its Own Terms." *Calypso Log*, 17 (3): 16-19.