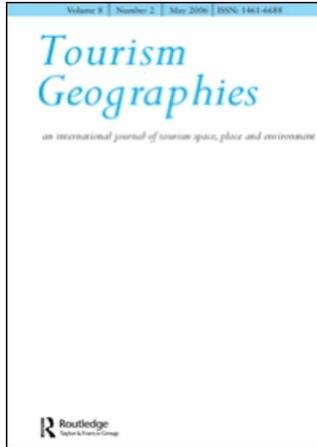


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Asian ecotourism: patterns and themes

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Abstract

Three main regions dominate the Asian ecotourism sector. The rainforest and reef region occurs mainly in Thailand and Malaysia and is closely linked with inbound markets and resort tourism. The mountain trekking region is an ecotourism hybrid found in the two sub-regions of northern Thailand and the Himalayas. The blossom and waterfall region is focused on Japan, South Korea and Taiwan, and involves high volumes of domestic participation and floral/hydrological/geological attractions. Major themes of Asian ecotourism include spatial concentration at several scales, the presence of ecotourism that is hybridized and otherwise linked to other forms of tourism, and the critical influence of external environments. It is appropriate to identify an emergent 'Asian ecotourism' that meets the core criteria normally associated with this sector in a distinctive way.

Keywords: ecotourism, Asia, trekking

Introduction

The term 'ecotourism' was introduced into the English-language academic literature by Romeril (1985) in the mid-1980s, and has since come to occupy a prominent if contentious position within the field of tourism studies. This contentiousness is partly related to the absence of a standard definition, although Blamey (1997, 2001) contends that a consensus is finally emerging around three core criteria. First, the primary attractions of ecotourism are **nature-based**, which can involve a focus on relatively undisturbed ecosystems in their entirety or on specific charismatic megafauna such as giant pandas, orangutans or polar bears (Weaver 2001a). Second, ecotourism is essentially **learning-focused** in regard to the

interaction between the tourist and these natural attractions. This educational element, which can range along a formal–informal spectrum, distinguishes ecotourism from other forms of nature-based tourism such as outdoor adventure travel or 3S (sea, sand, sun) resort tourism, where the natural environment provides a suitable setting respectively for thrill/risk and hedonistic motivations. Third, and also a major point of contention, ecotourism is expected to be **environmentally and socio-culturally sustainable**. Most definitions of ecotourism posit sustainability as a requisite characteristic. However, this is problematic in that there is no way of demonstrating, beyond any doubt, that a particular tourism product meets this criterion, in part because of the multifarious interpretations as to what sustainability entails (Hunter 1997; Butler 1998). Weaver (2001a), for this reason, proffers a definition of ecotourism that emphasizes the *appearance* of sustainability based on adherence to best practice thresholds and timely rectification of any inadvertent negative impacts that are identified. Yet, despite attempts to incorporate sustainability as a core element of the concept, ecotourism has been frequently criticized as a buzzword that is naively or maliciously applied for promotional purposes to virtually any kind of tourism product (see, for example, Wheeler 1994a, b).

Notwithstanding these contentions in definition, ecotourism has been enthusiastically embraced by many national tourism organizations (NTOs), their sub-national counterparts, donor agencies and relevant non-governmental organizations (NGOs), such as Conservation International, The Nature Conservancy and PATA since the early 1990s (Weaver 2001a). One reason for this is ecotourism's emphasis on community-focused sustainability, as described above, and its subsequent superiority, in theory, to more traditional forms of tourism that are alleged to generate negative environmental, socio-cultural and economic impacts in certain kinds of destinations (Weaver & Oppermann 2000). Second, ecotourism is widely regarded as one of the fastest growing forms of tourism, even though there is little broad empirical evidence to support such a general assertion, given the lack of a standard definition or official data collection procedures that differentiate ecotourists from other visitors. A third factor is the profile of ecotourists as a relatively high-spending and well educated (that is, desirable) market segment that has emerged from a number of recent empirical studies (see Wight 2001). Finally, ecotourism is increasingly regarded as a means of diversifying and increasing the competitiveness of existing tourism products by providing diversionary nature-based opportunities to conventional mass tourists and other visitors. This is demonstrated by Kenya, where the vast majority of inbound visitors are conventional mass tourists based in Nairobi or in coastal resorts who selected Kenya because of the opportunity it provides to engage in diversionary wildlife-viewing safari excursions (Akama 1996).

In this regard, there is growing recognition of an ecotourist/ecotourism spectrum that encompasses both 'hard' and 'soft' manifestations of the sector. Hard ecotourists are associated with a high level of environmental commitment, 'enhancement' sustainability (that is, sustainability that improves the destination setting), specialized and longer duration travel in small groups, and minimal use of on-site services or facilities. In contrast, soft ecotourists are more likely to display 'vener environmentalism', follow principles of 'steady state' sustainability (sustainability that maintains the equilibrium of the *status quo*), participate in ecotourism as part of multi-purpose vacations, and utilize a variety of on-site services (Weaver 2001a). An important geographical distinction is the tendency of soft ecotourists to concentrate in well-serviced and accessible locations, while hard ecotourists are dispersed beyond these foci. These foci, furthermore, tend to be concentrated in any given country within just a few high profile and accessible protected areas (Weaver 1998). Varying willingness to embrace soft ecotourists as 'true' ecotourists may help to account for wildly variable estimates as to the magnitude of global ecotourism. For example, the Canadian Wildlife Service estimate of CAN\$200 billion per year in 1989 was apparently based on a liberal interpretation, whereas the \$10 billion figure proffered by the Economist Intelligence Unit for that same year evidently adheres to the more restrictive 'hard' criteria (Cater 1994).

Most Asian countries share in the enthusiasm for promoting ecotourism, but few attempts have been made to identify the continent-wide ecotourism patterns that have emerged from these efforts over the past decade. The most notable effort to date is Lew (2001), who reviewed Asia's ecotourism attractions and potential, and emphasized the diversity of patterns among the continent's sub-regions. This paper adopts a regional approach to identify the main structural and spatial patterns of ecotourism development within Asia at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Relevant issues associated with each of these regions will also be raised, including speculation of future spatial and structural developments. For contextual purposes, this discussion is preceded by an overview of the overall Asian tourism sector.

Synopsis of Asian tourism

While Asia is characterized by rapid tourism growth compared with other world regions, considerable variability is evident at the sub-regional and national scale. Inbound stay-over arrivals in the World Tourism Organization-designated 'East Asia/Pacific' area, for example, increased 14.5 percent between 1999 and 2000, from 97.5 million to 111.7 million. In contrast, 'South Asia' grew over the same period by 9 percent. Yet, even this figure significantly exceeds the global performance of 7 percent

(World Tourism Organization 2001). The World Tourism Organization (1999) projects more than 407 million international tourist arrivals to the Asia/Pacific region by 2020, and speculates that the demand for ecotourism and cultural tourism will provide much of the impulse for this growth. The largest tourism industries, in terms of 2000 inbound arrivals, are concentrated in eastern Asia – China (31 million), Hong Kong (13 million), Malaysia (10 million), Thailand (9.5 million) and Singapore (7 million). These countries, in addition, displayed high growth in 2000 over 1999 relative to the global average, with respective performances of 15.5 percent, 15.3 percent, 26.1 percent, 10.7 percent and 11.9 percent. At the opposite end of the spectrum, certain western and southern Asian destinations (e.g. Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq and the countries of former Soviet Central Asia) have small or non-existent tourism sectors characterized by uneven performance. The pattern of uneven spatial distribution and growth is even more apparent at the sub-national level, where tourism tends to concentrate in major international and regional gateways as well as within or near selected sites of cultural or natural significance. Asian tourism, in response to rapid economic growth since the 1960s, is also characterized by increasing intra-regional and domestic travel. Regarding intra-regional trends, Asian markets accounted for 83 percent and 76 percent of all inbound arrivals in northeastern and southeastern Asia respectively in 1996 (World Tourism Organization 1999). Domestic tourism has been important in more developed countries such as Japan and South Korea for several decades, but is now attaining a higher profile through the rest of Asia as well. This is illustrated by China, where domestic tourism is growing at an annual rate of almost 8 percent and involved 694 million tourists in 1998 (Wu, *et al.* 2000).

Established ecotourism regions

Lew (2001) emphasizes that potential ecotourism attractions exist throughout Asia, and it is therefore proposed that a ubiquitous but subtle hard ecotourism region occupies the entire continent. However, as one moves toward the softer end of the ecotourism spectrum, increasing regional differentiation and concentration is evident. For discussion purposes, three relatively well-articulated formal ecotourism regions can be identified. These are designated as the **rainforest and reef**, **mountain trekking** and **blossom and waterfall** regions (Figure 1).

Rainforest and reef region

The rainforest and reef ecotourism region is found in southern Thailand as well as insular and peninsular Malaysia, and as exclaves in Bali and

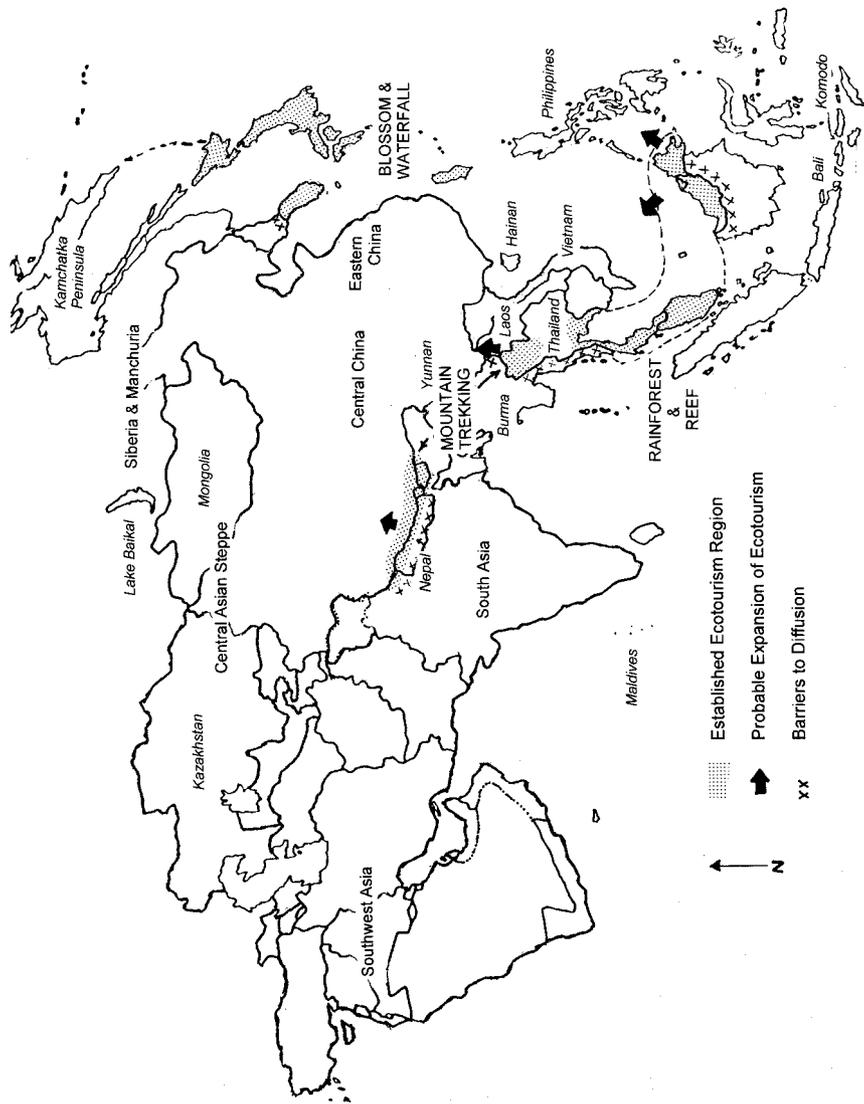


Figure 1 Established and embryonic ecotourism regions in Asia.

selected destinations in the Philippines. The simplicity of the attraction base (i.e. rainforests and coral reefs) disguises the complex structure of the region, which is modelled at the local scale in Figure 2. The ecotourism system in this region, as in Kenya, is supported by concentrations of conventional (and mostly inbound) mass tourists in beach resorts such as Phuket (Thailand) and Penang (Malaysia) (see Wong 1998), as well as in international and regional gateways (e.g. Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur and Kuching). These gateways, as nodes of modernization exposed to western influence, also house the relatively small proportion of nationals inclined to participate in ecotourism, as it is understood in the Eurocentric sense. As with the Kenyan profile described above, a substantial proportion of these conventional mass tourists seek diversion during a conventional type of vacation through day-only visits to nearby terrestrial or marine protected areas. In line with soft ecotourist proclivities, most visitor activity within these protected areas is confined to a very small area. For example, Sherman and Dixon (1991) point out that during the late 1980s, almost all of the 400,000 annual visitors to Khao Yai National Park, north of Bangkok, were concentrated along the one major highway that bisects the park, while 90 percent of the park remained completely undeveloped. Although protected area visitation statistics are sometimes treated synonymously with ecotourism, it is clear that not all of these visitors could be classified as ecotourists, especially among Thai nationals. Similarly, not all snorkellers or divers can be considered ecotourists, although Cater and

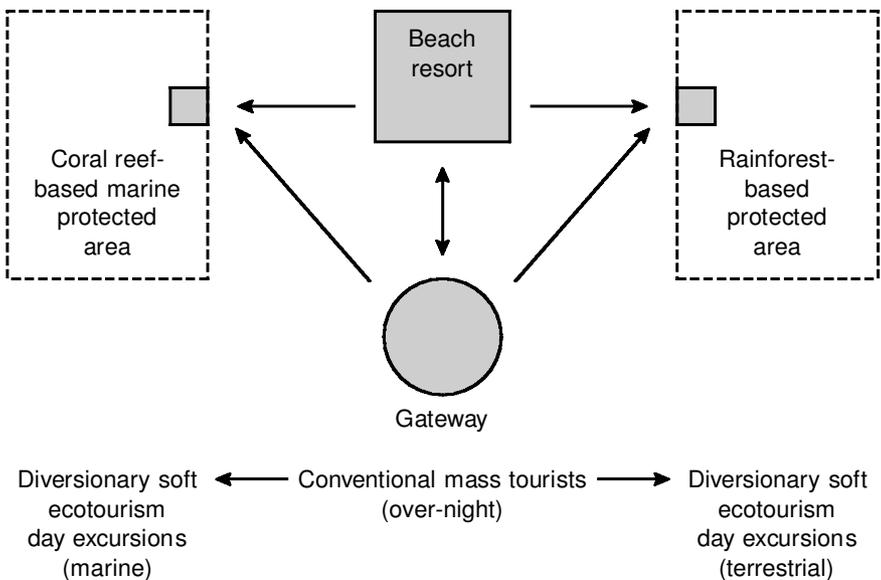


Figure 2 Local scale dynamics in the rainforest and reef ecotourism region.

Cater (2001), among others, have argued that diving in particular generally meets the criteria associated with ecotourism. This would especially seem to be the case when the venue is a marine protected area.

The development of the rainforest and reef ecotourism region, while dependent on the diffusion of the area's mass tourism industry, has also been made possible by supply-side 'pull' factors other than those such as socio-political stability and improved infrastructure that have supported mass tourism growth. These include protected area systems in both Thailand and Malaysia that, while not problem-free, appear to be better managed and funded than the 'paper parks' that prevail in many developing regions. Second, protected area authorities have been willing to develop portions of the more accessible parks to accommodate various types of tourism activity. Third, parts of the region host endemic charismatic megafauna such as the orangutan (in Malaysia). Fourth, the extent of unsustainable logging, hunting and farming activities has been curtailed in recent years if not arrested altogether. Fifth, the establishment of specialized institutions and policies intended to facilitate the development of ecotourism both reflects and encourages its continued diffusion. This is especially evident in the ecotourism plans that have been released by Malaysia as well as by the Malaysian Borneo states of Sarawak and Sabah (Chong 2000), and by the establishment of the Institute of Ecotourism at Thailand's Srinakharinwirot University (Dowling 2000).

The rainforest and reef ecotourism region displays a localized distance-decay effect in that the beach resort/soft ecotourism pattern depicted in Figure 2 rapidly gives way to a combined FIT and hard ecotourism construct beyond the day-use hinterland of these major gateways and beach resorts. At a broader scale, the future diffusion of this region is constrained by the spatial confines of rainforest and reef resources, as well as by geopolitical and other factors. For example, Brunei's national boundaries effectively served as an almost impermeable barrier to the expansion of the rainforest and reef region due to the Sultanate's longstanding policy of discouraging all forms of tourism development. However, since the mid-1990s, Brunei has opted for a strategy of actively encouraging 'appropriate' forms of tourism based on culture and the natural environment (Tan 1995; Evans 2000). In contrast, while the Indonesian government has consistently supported tourism, the diffusion of ecotourism has been arrested by chronic political and social unrest in many parts of the country, as well as inadequate infrastructure and ongoing environmental degradation. Hence, the soft ecotourism pattern is not likely to be repeated on a large scale beyond Bali, the Jakarta hinterland, and high profile protected areas such as Komodo island (Goodwin 2000; Walpole 2001) and Mount Bromo (East Java) (Cochrane 2000) which each attract 100–200,000 visitors per year. Indonesian Borneo (Kalimantan), which has the potential to be the stronghold of Indonesian ecotourism, is illustrative of these

dissuasive external factors, having been subject to relentless deforestation, large-scale burning and inter-ethnic conflict during the past decade. Similar, but less publicized, forces have discouraged the establishment of ecotourism in southern Burma. The most likely path of regional expansion is in a northeasterly direction involving suitable areas of Vietnam, the Philippines (where related activity is already established in locations such as Apo Island and the Tubbataha reef), Taiwan, and the southern-most portions of the Japanese archipelago. In recent years, Vietnam has adopted an aggressive approach to tourism that has resulted in the number of inbound arrivals increasing from 600,000 in 1993 to 1.5 million in 1998 (Mok & Lam 2000). From an ecotourism perspective in particular, the cultivation of a positive market awareness was assisted by the discovery of the Vu Quang ox in 1992, the world's first large new mammal discovery since 1910 (Cresswell & Maclaren 2000).

Mountain trekking region

The mountain trekking region has one distinct spatial component centred in northern Thailand and another focused on the Himalayas (Figure 1). A major structural characteristic of this region is the integration of ecotourism into a hybridized form of tourism known as 'trekking'. This typically involves small-group hiking expeditions that amalgamate elements of adventure tourism, cultural tourism and ecotourism – a combination that Fennell (1999) describes with the acronym 'ACE tourism'. Both sub-regions have been the subject of extensive research by tourism academics. For example, Cohen (1989), Dearden (1991) and Nimmonratana (2000) have all described the growth and structure of trekking tourism in northern Thailand, which involves an expanding number of local villages and landscapes around major regional gateways such as Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai. An interesting development has been the evolution of trekking in northern Thailand from a small-scale alternative tourism-type pursuit to a major industry involving increasingly larger companies and international linkages – a trajectory that at least superficially evokes the dynamics of the destination life cycle model (Butler 1980). In the mid-1980s, trekking involved an estimated 100,000 participants per year (Dearden & Harron 1994), 90 percent of whom were young inbound backpackers (Petry 1996). By 1998, almost one million inbound tourists visited Chiang Mai and adjacent provinces, and the Tourism Authority of Thailand estimated that 40 percent of this influx participated in hill tribe or jungle trekking (TAT 2000). Moreover, the backpacker component since the mid-1990s has declined to about 50 percent, with the remainder consisting of older, more conventional international tourists (Petry 1996).

Like northern Thailand, trekking in the Himalayan sub-region is a distributive distance-decay phenomenon wherein international tourists arrive in major gateways such as Khatmandu (Nepal) or Lhasa (Tibet) and progress into gradually smaller and local gateways closer to the actual trekking venues. Zurick (1992) has modelled ACE tourism growth in Nepal as a multi-pronged process of south-to-north contagious and hierarchical diffusion that is gradually transforming the mountainous northern half of the country into a discernable trekking-based tourism region. With about 100,000 trekkers arriving each year, Nepal is the dominant country in this ecotourism sub-region. Within Nepal, the Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP) in north central Nepal accommodates about one-half of this intake and is the epicentre of the Himalayan trekking sector. The ACAP, like other Nepalese protected areas, is distinctive because of its high resident population (over 100,000) and emphasis on multiple-use management that involves these local communities and includes tourism (Nepal 2000). Yet, trekking has often been associated with unsustainable levels of fuel wood harvesting, water contamination and littering (see, for example, Wells 1993 and Nepal 2000), raising questions as to whether Himalayan trekking, in general, meets the sustainability criterion of ecotourism. However, Sofield (1999) questions this conventional wisdom by arguing that tourism is not the great instigator of deforestation in the region that it is widely purported to be, and is associated with environmental enhancement in some regions.

The diffusion of mountain trekking in Asia, as modelled by Zurick (1992), has been greatly influenced by geopolitical considerations associated with the location of such areas along or near sensitive border frontiers. In northern Thailand, trekking was both a consequence and component of government policies intended to 'tame' the highland tribal people of the area and promote national integration, especially in light of concerns over regional opium production and potential left-wing and ethnic insurgencies (Cohen 1989). Geopolitical influences are even more germane in the Himalayan sub-region. Each country (i.e. Nepal, India, China, Bhutan, Pakistan) to a greater or lesser extent practices a policy of 'incremental access' whereby selected areas are strategically opened or prohibited to tourism, as warranted by the internal and external political situation. India, for example, carefully controls the flow of inbound tourists into states and territories that abut the sensitive borders with China and Pakistan. Arunachal Pradesh is an example of an Indian state that was suddenly opened up to tourism by the federal government but then just as rapidly closed again (Shackley 1995). The tourism frontier in Tibet, similarly, has oscillated in response to changing geopolitical dynamics in the region. Bhutan is notable at the national level for exceptionally restrictive policies that limit the annual inbound intake to around 5,000 and result in its status as Asia's only 'comprehensive' alternative tourism

destination, that is, one where international mass tourism dynamics remain negligible by design. Though Nepal, in contrast, has consistently been the most open to tourism of all Himalayan countries, incremental access policies are also evident at the regional level. For example, tourism was allowed into the Upper Mustang region of the ACAP in 1992 following the implementation of a tourism strategy in the south of the park that was widely judged to be successful. However, despite (or because of) a rigid visitor quota, this subsequent extension was unsuccessful due to different physical and cultural conditions in the area and, more critically, the apparent failure of tourism to provide substantial benefits to the local population (Nepal 2000).

Attempts to predict the future diffusion of the two mountain trekking sub-regions are confounded by the volatile geopolitical situation in the area. Accelerated tension between India and Pakistan, for instance, has severely curtailed tourism in Kashmir, where separatist groups have kidnapped trekkers on several occasions. Northern Thailand is less uncertain. Despite occasional conflict along the border with Burma, Thailand has promoted itself as a gateway to Burma, Laos and China as part of its recent 'Amazing Thailand' tourism campaign (Muqbal 1999). Parts of the latter two countries in particular are being incorporated into the mountain trekking region. Most of Laos possesses the mix of physical and cultural resources that is amenable to trekking activity, and the government has emphasized small-scale alternative tourism as the preferred tourism option (Hall 1997). China's Yunnan province is also experiencing substantial growth in trekking and related activities, having in its favour a complex array of bio-regions that represent about one-half of the country's flora and 64 percent of its bird species (Lew 2001). Yunnan is the only Chinese province to designate tourism as its leading economic sector, and in promotional campaigns has capitalized on its status as the purported setting of Shangri-La in Hilton's novel *Lost Horizon* (Albers & Grinspoon 1997). Inbound arrivals to the province were forecast to exceed 1.3 million in 2002, a substantial portion arriving as part of a spillover effect from Thailand and Laos. A confounding factor is the annual presence of almost 35 million domestic tourists, representing 96 percent of all tourists (Cater 2001). The extent to which these arrivals participate in trekking or other forms of ecotourism is unknown and requires investigation, as this is relevant to the issue of whether distinctive indigenous ecotourism models occur in Asia, as discussed below.

Blossom and waterfall region

The 'blossom and waterfall' ecotourism region is distinguished from the previous two regions by the volume and origin of its market and, as

suggested in the name, by the character of this market's interaction with available nature-based resources. The region encompasses Japan and the 'tiger' economies of South Korea and Taiwan. Paradoxically, all three countries are densely populated but dominated by forest-covered mountains, a high proportion of which is designated as protected area. Japan, whose National Park system accommodated a remarkable 316 million visits as long ago as 1977 (Sutherland & Britton 1980), best illustrates the ecotourism pattern in this region. Given that Japan was the recipient of less than five million inbound visitors in 2000, it may be assumed that the vast majority of National Park visitors are domestic in origin. Less clear is the extent to which these visitors meet the three core requirements of ecotourism and resemble the prototypical 'western' (or Eurocentric) ecotourists and quasi-ecotourists encountered in southern Thailand and the Himalayas. Some indication is provided by the fact that Japanese National Parks, like those in England and Wales, are lower-order protected areas that combine natural and cultural impulses in the landscape. Moreover, about one-half of all land occupied by National Parks is private land. Substantial human manipulation of the environment can enhance the aesthetic appeal of the region's 'natural' environment to the domestic population, as evidenced in the *furusato* landscape of forested mountains and small valley farms and villages that constitutes an escapist ideal from the realities of modern urban Japan (Rea 2000).

Pending further investigation, it also appears as if greater emphasis is placed on floral, hydrological and geological attractions, as opposed to fauna. This is expressed in the high value placed on viewing cherry blossoms and other spring flowers, and on *momiji-gari*, or 'hunting the autumn leaves' (Sutherland & Britton 1980). The web site for the high profile Daisetsuzan National Park, on the northern island of Hokkaido, provides an indication of Japanese ecotourism preferences and patterns (Daisetsuzan National Park Executive Council 1997). This site emphasizes wild flowers, autumn colours, forest views, waterfalls, cross-country skiing, lakes and marshes, hot springs, rock climbing and Shinto shrines. Not only is little said of wildlife, but the brown bear, a potential icon species, is explicitly cited as a dangerous denizen that should be avoided (the visitor centre also has stuffed specimens on display, which raises further questions about the appropriate representation and interpretation of this creature). Selected learning opportunities appear to be facilitated within the learning centres, with the emphasis being more on personal aesthetic appreciation. High levels of visitation within the Japanese system (there are about 80 million visits per year just to the National Park that includes Mount Fuji) raises concerns about environmental sustainability. However, these are countered by the argument that respect for and harmony with nature is essential to Buddhism and Shintoism (Hashimoto 1997), and by the tendency of Japanese park visitors to travel in well-behaved groups. From a

socio-cultural perspective, most Japanese consider high levels of crowding to be acceptable, and this may therefore be another dimension of a possible indigenous model of ecotourism in this region.

Emergent and potential ecotourism regions

Beyond the three regions described above, at least six embryonic and speculative ecotourism regions are also discernable. Because of their lack of structural articulation, regional rather than activity or attraction labels designate these regions below. The incipient ecotourism region designated as **central China**, while favoured by relatively mountainous, forested and sparsely populated landscapes compared with eastern China, is best known for its iconic giant pandas. China's incremental access policies have opened the region's protected areas to inbound ecotourists since the 1980s. In addition, this inflow has been augmented by an increasing number of domestic tourists, more of whom are motivated by a desire to visit natural attractions as the market becomes more segmented and complex (Wu, *et al.* 2000). Several protected areas are now being systematically developed as ecotourism attractions. As in all these emergent regions, the location of high profile protected areas is a major factor that will influence the future spatial pattern of ecotourism development in central China. The prospects for ecotourism in **eastern China**, in contrast, are constrained by highly modified landscapes with limited ecotourism potential. Most likely, eastern China will become important as a major ecotourist market origin region focused initially on domestic ecotourism regions such as central China and Yunnan province (i.e. in the mountain trekking region), and in the future on the rainforest and reef region, both domestic (e.g. Hainan island) and international.

South Asia, outside of the Himalayas, is presently a region of minor ecotourism activity. This lack of articulation is closely associated with the low volume of inbound tourism, as noted above, and the small proportion of this traffic that falls under the recreation/vacation category. While there is a substantial amount of domestic tourism within the sub-continent, much of this is pilgrimage and VFR-related, and is therefore also unlikely to intersect with ecotourism to any significant extent. A supply-side factor hindering the development of ecotourism is widespread environmental deterioration and the existence of protected area systems that are inadequately funded and managed, and hence dominated by 'paper parks' that do not fulfil their preservation mandate. In this context, ecotourism is effectively confined to a few relatively accessible and higher profile protected areas, including Royal Chitwan National Park in the lowland *terai* region of Nepal (Kattel 1995; Bookbinder, *et al.* 1998). An incipient ecotourism sector has emerged in the Sunderbans of the Ganges

delta between India and Bangladesh, but does not involve more than a few thousand inbound visitors per year (Tisdell 1997). The Indian Ocean archipelago of the Maldives is an intriguing regional anomaly, given its status as a tourism-dependent micro-state whose attractions are largely focused around coral reefs (Bosselman, *et al.* 1999). All factors considered, south Asia does not appear to offer good potential for further articulation as an ecotourism region in the foreseeable future.

Southwest Asia is also an area that does not appear to offer good prospects for the development of a significant ecotourism sector (Lew 2001), although for different reasons than those associated with south Asia. First, widespread political instability has hindered the establishment of large-scale vacation-orientated tourism industries in most countries, with notable exceptions such as Turkey, Bahrain, Jordan and Israel. Thus, there is little evidence of the mass tourism/soft ecotourism nexus that characterizes the rainforest and reef region. Second, the arid and semi-arid landscapes that dominate southwest Asia do not conjure the same appealing image to potential ecotourists as rainforests, high mountains or coral reefs, but rather invoke discomfort, monotony and negative faunal imagery such as scorpions and spiders. Third, the region has only a very small proportion of its territory set aside as protected areas compared with other world regions. For example, under one percent of land is thus designated in Iraq (0.0), United Arab Emirates (0.0), Yemen (0.0), Afghanistan (0.3) and Lebanon (0.3) (World Resources Institute 1998). Fourth, environmental destruction is widespread and includes high profile incidents such as the shrinkage of the Aral Sea and the destruction of oil wells in Kuwait by Iraq following its withdrawal from that country after the Gulf War.

The **central Asian steppe** incipient ecotourism region incorporates the grasslands and adjacent biomes of Mongolia, Kazakhstan and north-western China. The potential appeal of this area from an ecotourism perspective includes exceptionally low human population densities, the add-on cultural attraction of extant nomadic cultures, expanding protected area networks, and an abundance of large mammals, including Asian wild ass, snow leopard, wild Bactrian camel and ibex. There is potential to develop an ecotourism product similar to the vehicle-based viewing activity that occurs in the 'Safari corridor' of sub-Saharan Africa (Weaver 2001b).

Finally, the **Siberia and Manchuria** region is distinctive for its size and wilderness character, matched elsewhere in Asia only by China's Tibetan Plateau and the steppe. Currently, a limited amount of activity, dominated by inbound markets, is associated with areas such as Lake Baikal and the Kamchatka Peninsula. Because of its size and relatively undisturbed condition, the area has the potential to become a major ecotourism frontier for northeastern Asian countries, such as Japan and South Korea, as well as North America. However, this potential will also depend on the extent

to which the activities of hostile external environments are curtailed. These include military interests, 'rogue' hunting directed toward vulnerable species such as the Siberian tiger, and the expansion of mining and forestry.

Discussion and conclusions

Conventional mass tourism has been criticized, among other traits, for its high levels of concentration within particular urban and coastal environments. Asian ecotourism, however, displays a similar pattern of concentration. This theme is evident at the continental level, where three relatively well-articulated ecotourism regions are discernable. Moreover, concentration is evident within these regions in that most ecotourism activity occurs within a small number of strategically located protected areas, and in just a few site-hardened locations within these protected areas. When this pattern is combined with the large volumes of ecotourism-related visitation that are especially evident in countries such as Japan and Thailand, it is clear that Asian ecotourism in the main does not adhere to the 'alternative tourism' ideal of the 1980s. Rather, it may itself be considered a form of mass tourism that is dependent upon and inextricably linked to the presence of other types of mass tourism. This is best illustrated in the rainforest and reef ecotourism region, which can be regarded as a sub-region of a global ecotourism region that conforms to the global 'pleasure periphery' (Turner & Ash 1975; Zurick 1992) and is emulated in other destinations such as Kenya and Costa Rica (Weaver 1998, 1999). One relevant question, then, is whether this status as 'mass ecotourism' is compatible with the core criteria of ecotourism, and with environmental and socio-cultural sustainability in particular. In theory, and in concert with Jafari's (1989) concept of the contemporary 'knowledge-based' platform of tourism studies, there is no basis for assuming that the sustainability of a destination will inevitably decline as tourism becomes larger in scale. Indeed, Clarke (1997) and others argue that economies of scale may enhance the sustainability of a destination by, for example, facilitating effective site-hardening measures and volumes of activity that justify expensive recycling and co-generation initiatives. On the other hand, there is also the implicit danger that intensified soft ecotourism will become transformed into unsustainable mass tourism if carrying capacity thresholds are not increased in tandem with increases in visitation (Weaver 2001a).

A second theme in Asian ecotourism is the lack of a pure 'ecotourism' construct in any of the major or emergent regions. The dependency of ecotourism on mass resort tourism in the rainforest and reef region has already been emphasized, wherein most soft ecotourists are mass resort tourists engaging in protected area visits as a diversion. In activities such

as scuba diving and snorkelling, the line is even more blurred. Hybridization is more broadly evident in the mountain trekking region, where ecotourism is subsumed under the broader rubric of ACE tourism. Here too, the inclusion of other motivations and impulses increases the challenge of maintaining any focus on the core ecotourism criteria. It is also possible that the distinction between captive and non-captive wildlife tourism will decrease as traditional zoos give way to less confined and more natural 'wildlife parks' (Croke 1997). Concurrently, protected areas increasingly resemble the latter as they become isolated oases of natural habitat that effectively confine much of their wildlife. Already, most viewing of orangutans and giant pandas occurs in semi-captive wildlife refuges and sanctuaries rather than unconstrained, wild settings (Russell & Ankenman 1996). All of these examples suggest a movement toward a sort of 'quasi-ecotourism' norm throughout Asia. Equally relevant to this context is the argument for peculiarly 'Asian' models of ecotourism that for cultural reasons deviate from the conventional Eurocentric parameters that currently inform the ecotourism literature. The different aesthetics, attractions and crowding thresholds have been noted above in the Japanese context, although research by Hashimoto (1997) suggests that somewhat different models may apply to the Taiwanese and mainland Chinese markets. Whether these models, once articulated, will even qualify as ecotourism in any recognizable way is still an open question, since no concerted investigations have yet been published on this subject. Also unknown is the extent to which the Asian markets will be influenced by western models of ecotourism participation. The issue is an important one given the mass growth in domestic and intra-regional tourism throughout Asia, and the concomitant relative diminution of the traditional 'western' inbound ecotourist markets.

A third theme is the critical role of external environments, both helpful and hostile, in dictating the development of Asia's ecotourism regions. The ecotourism literature, along with tourism research in general, is surprisingly myopic and insular in this regard. Yet, it is clear that the prospects of ecotourism are dependent on well-managed public protected areas, legislation that curtails rapacious farming, mining and logging, and governments that foster stability and that allow areas to be opened for tourism. It is an array of threatening external environments rather than any inherent (i.e. ecotourism) factors, for example, that has impeded the diffusion of ecotourism into Indonesia and Burma. Nor are there any grounds for complacency in established ecotourism destinations, where statements about environmental stability are relative. Species in Thailand dependent for their survival on forests will soon survive only within the protected area system, given that 50 percent of the forest cover was lost between 1961 and 1991 (Dearden, *et al.* 1998). Indicative of dynamics in the vicinity of critical protected areas is the deforestation of virtually

the entire buffer zone surrounding Khao Yai National Park during the 20 years since its creation, and the loss of 92 km² within the park itself through illegal occupation and incursion. Some 165,000 people were estimated to be living illegally within Thailand's protected areas during the mid-1990s (Dearden & Chettamart 1997). The ability of ecotourism to respond effectively to these threats is again mostly a question of scale. It is only through a large and well-mobilized ecotourism industry, preferably supported by the conventional tourism industry, that ecotourism is capable of competing and lobbying against entrenched primary sector and other interests. It is only through large volumes of visitation and associated entry fees, for example, that ecotourism can exercise its potential role as an incentive to preserve natural habitat in the face of those who believe that the land is more valuable if farmed or logged (Weaver 2001a).

Participation in ecotourism will continue to expand in Asia, with differences in physical and human geography ensuring the maintenance of regional distinctions as described above. The stereotype western model of soft ecotourism will still be encountered, but the 'nature-based', 'learning' and 'sustainability' criteria that currently define western ecotourism are likely to require adaptation to the Asian context. This 'Asian ecotourism' will emphasize domestic and inter-Asian markets that are tightly linked to conventional tourism and participate in ecotourism as a diversion to other forms of tourism and/or as a hybridized activity. It will continue to be spatially constrained, and will place more emphasis on landscape aesthetics, including mixed cultural/natural landscapes. Floral and geological attractions will be relatively more important than wildlife, which is heavily emphasized in western ecotourism. This article will hopefully serve as a catalyst for a more systematic examination of emerging spatial and structural patterns of ecotourism in Asia.

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Résumé: Distribution et thèmes de l'écotourisme Asiatique

Trois régions principales dominent le secteur de l'écotourisme asiatique. La forêt vierge et les coraux se trouvent surtout en Thaïland et en Malaisie et existe de concert avec les principaux marchés étrangers et les enclaves touristiques. Les randonnées en montagne est une forme hybride d'écotourisme qui se pratique dans les deux sous-régions de Thaïlande du Nord et dans les Himalayas. La région des floraisons et des cascades est centrée sur le Japon, la Corée du Sud et Taiwan. De nombreux touristes domestiques visitent ces attractions florales, hydrologiques et géologiques. Les thèmes principaux de l'écotourisme asiatique comprennent leur concentration géographique à diverses échelles, la présence d'un écotourisme hybride et lié à d'autres formes de tourisme et l'influence critique des environnements externes. Il est justifié d'identifier le dégagement d'un écotourisme asiatique particulier dont les caractéristiques principales correspondent à celles que l'on associe généralement à ce secteur.

Mots-clés: écotourisme, Asie, ascension

Inhaltsangabe: Muster und Forschungsfelder des asiatischen Ökotourismus

Das asiatische Marktsegment des Ökotourismus wird von drei Großlandschaften beherrscht: Regenwälder und Korallenriffe finden sich vor allem in Thailand und Malaysia und sind eng mit ausländischem Tourismus und Ferienanlagen verbunden. Die hybride Ökotourismusform des Gebirgstreckings findet sich in Nordthailand und im Himalaja. Die Blüten- und Wasserfallziele mit ihren botanischen, geologischen und hydrologischen Attraktionen konzentrieren sich unter starker Beteiligung des inländischen Tourismus auf Japan, Südkorea und Taiwan. Die Hauptforschungsfelder des Ökotourismus in Asien schließen die räumliche Konzentration auf verschiedenen Maßstabsebenen, die hybriden oder sonstigen Verflechtungen des Ökotourismus mit anderen Tourismusformen und den kritischen Einfluß der Umgebungen ein. Es ist angemessen, von einem entstehenden 'asiatischen Ökotourismus' zu sprechen, welcher die Hauptgrundsätze erfüllt, die mit diesem Marktsektor verbunden werden.

Schlüsselwörter: Ökotourismus, Asien, Trekking