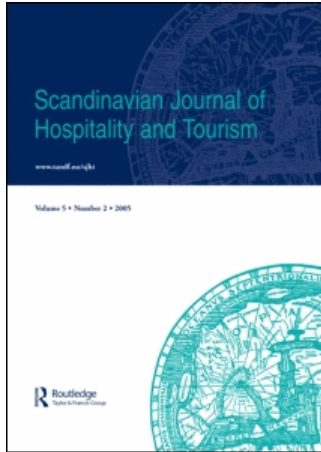


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RESEARCH NOTE

Concepts of Sustainable Development, Sustainable Tourism, and Ecotourism: Definitions, Principles, and Linkages

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Abstract

The concepts of sustainable development, sustainable tourism, and ecotourism all represent relatively recent developments that, particularly since the early 1990s, have been the subject of controversial debate. There is no generally accepted understanding of their precise meaning and a definitional approach appears problematic. The aim of this Research Note is therefore to provide a brief overview of their background, different interpretations, values, and principles as well as the linkages between them. This should lead to an understanding that implementation of these concepts is not just an academic and technical discourse but, more so, a socio-political question.

The economic significance of tourism has meant that its ecological and socio-cultural impacts are often ignored. Since the late 1970s and early 1980s, however, the negative consequences of tourism have increasingly been recognized and intense debate about the ecological and social costs of tourism development has ensued. At first, this primarily ecologically orientated tourism critique was an attempt to address the problems of unlimited growth and unrestricted mass tourism (e.g. Krippendorf, 1975). Later, however, alternative approaches to tourism development have been increasingly discussed, creating a diversity of terms and concepts for new directions in tourism development. *Ecotourism* and *sustainable tourism* are the more popular ideas heading this debate. These involve multiple actors, ranging from politics, society, and economy, sometimes with conflicting interests, and leading to conceptions with a variety of facets.

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Ecotourism, for instance, was picked up by the tourism industry as a marketing tool, the industry recognizing that 'green' sells and 'eco' means big business (e.g. Lindberg & McKercher, 1997; Fennell, 1999). Today, ecotourism is seen as one of the fastest growing market segments in the tourism industry, with a prosperous future outlook, particularly in light of ever-increasing demands by tourists around the world for an ultimate nature experience (e.g. Buckley, 1994; Herliczek, 1996). Hassan (2000, p. 239), for instance, points out that "interest in ecotourism experiences is growing by 25% to 30% per year".

Ecotourism development has also been strongly pushed by governments through the development of policies and strategies. Their support for the concept is based on its potential as a job and income generator, particularly for local communities and therefore as an effective means of regional development. Too often, however, the tourism industry and governments adopt a narrow product-centred perspective only, without accepting ecotourism as a paradigm for sustainable tourism development in natural areas (Buckley, 1994; Lindberg & McKercher, 1997).

Environmentalists and conservationists, on the other hand, advocate the concept mainly as a channel through which to promote conservation and a sustainable management regime restricted not just to protected areas. They hope that this idea of "protection through usage" will lead to a generally more 'green' tourism industry and an increase in the ecological and socio-cultural awareness and behaviour of tourists (e.g. Ziffer, 1989; Boo, 1990).

Considering these diverse approaches to the concept, it is not surprising that there is some discrepancy over its objectives. Definitions are always a matter of perspective, interests, and values which ultimately lead to distinct and often conflicting perceptions of a complex and dynamic concept, such as ecotourism. Since multifaceted interests are involved, all embracing this idea as a desirable goal for tourism development, various interpretations of the concept have emerged from this vigorous and powerful debate. With the discussion becoming increasingly refined, however, a prevalent understanding of ecotourism as the intersection of nature-based tourism and sustainable tourism has developed (e.g. Ecotourism Working Group, 1995; Muller, 1998; Fennell, 1999; Wearing & Neil, 1999). The term cannot therefore simply be used synonymously with nature-based tourism, since the former concept is sustainable tourism in natural areas, embracing the values of sustainability. Hence, ecotourism is closely linked to the concept of sustainable tourism and should therefore be consistent with the principles of the parental paradigm of sustainable development, balancing economic, ecological, and social aspects as an integrated whole. This understanding highlights the significant relationship between ecotourism, sustainable tourism, and sustainable development (e.g. Hall & Lew, 1998).

In recent years, the paradigm of sustainable development has become very popular worldwide, and has moved to the centre of political debate. Its global perspective is an important element, but for the concept to be operationalized it must be brought to a more practical level of action. In this context the slogan "think globally, act locally" develops a concrete meaning (Becker et al., 1996). In addition to its projection to national, regional, and local levels, the idea has also been transposed to contexts such as the tourism sector. The increasing popularity of the concept of sustainable

development, and the need for its spatial and sectoral specification, has therefore made the concepts of sustainable tourism and ecotourism the subject of lively debate. Nevertheless, this approach should not ignore the global nature of tourism and its economic, ecological, and social consequences.

Ecotourism, understood as sustainable tourism in natural areas, has the potential to assist a more workable approach to achieve sustainability objectives through tourism. Thus, ecotourism contributes not only to sustainable development but also to the long and difficult process of its implementation in the tourism system (e.g. Hall & Lew, 1998).

The debate about definitions and how the concepts of sustainable development, sustainable tourism, and ecotourism can be translated into the real world, however, often remains a highly technical, scientific one and neglects the consideration of values and interests of the various actors involved. In the search for compromise, the struggle of who gets what, when, where, how, and why (Lasswell, 1936), they determine the interpretation of these ideas and their implementation. Consequently, to ignore these interactions and power arrangements would mean to omit a highly political phenomenon, a process that governs how these concepts are defined and translated into action or non-action. Too much has remained at the level of political rhetoric, however, indicating the lack of a clear political will and the capability to achieve sustainability. With regard to the experience with sustainable tourism and ecotourism policies already in place, increasingly coming under question is whether the traditional policy and decision-making processes and institutional arrangements are suitable for implementing the sustainability agenda successfully and are therefore capable of meeting the challenges and demands of sustainable tourism and ecotourism development.

It is widely accepted that sustainability as a challenging social goal can only be achieved if a broad consensus base is established through extensive co-operation between the relevant forces within society. As Lew and Hall point out (1998, p. 199): “[s]ustainable tourism represents a value orientation”, a new partnership between government, industry, community, and academia is required to establish and implement consensual objectives *via* a comprehensive political dialogue. Greater participation and co-operation will lead to a greater legitimacy of political decisions and, thus, increase the capability of governments to respond adequately to the complex issues of sustainability. The debate must therefore be re-focused on the often highly fragmented system of key players who determine the interpretation of sustainable tourism and ecotourism and to analysis of the political processes and institutional arrangements in place, since these represent important mechanisms directing and guiding sustainable tourism development.

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