Module # 11 – Component # 9

Introduction To Ecotourism

Introduction

"Much is said these days about how lucrative ecotourism could be to a subcontinent unshackled from the political incorrectness of the past. But those with knowledge of ecology are wary of this loose talk. They have been on safari vehicles, crashing through the bush, radios rasping the location of the next of the “Big Five” on the list. This activity is not sustainable for the masses, and those entrusted with developing ecotourism in Southern Africa must ensure that the environmental impacts of the activities are fully understood”.

Tourism is the biggest industry in the world and some say it is one of the very few growth industries in the world. It provides one in every fourteen jobs internationally and generates more than ten percent of the global G.N.P. (Gross National Product).

It is also the only industry that allows for a net flow of wealth from developed to developing countries.

Ecotourism generates fifty-eight times more revenue than cattle farming. Cattle farming shows a fourteen Rand per hectare profit whereas the Sabie Sand Game Reserve generates seven hundred Rand per hectare.

A lion in a Kenyan game reserve today, is estimated to be worth five hundred and seventy-five thousand dollars ($575,000.00) in foreign revenue from game viewing.

Each free-flying macaw in Peru generates four thousand seven hundred dollars ($4,700.00) in revenue each year.

Today there are 61 million birdwatchers in the U.S.A. alone, spending 73 billion dollars per year on their hobby. There are whale watchers, cyclists, hikers and anglers all waiting the chance to visit new destinations and to learn about new cultures.

Southern Africa has an excellent infrastructure and is amongst the most richly endowed areas in the world in terms of its wildlife and scenic beauty. Our recent political changes and new acceptance by the world at large must therefore indicate that we are surely on the verge of becoming one of the world’s leading tourist destinations.

South Africa receives ± 10 million tourists annually.
From the above, it appears that Southern African tourism can flourish because of the expected influx of tourists, but there is a down-side.

- Southern African (and particularly South African) **service standards** are amongst the poorest in the world, and our **level of training** throughout the industry is extremely low.

- **Over four million people** (out of a total population of ± 49.5 million) are employed directly in the tourism industry in Africa, and of these, very few have ever received any **formal training**.

- These factors must be borne in mind if we are to **expect tourists to return** to the subcontinent or recommend our destinations to their friends and families.

- The onus is on managers and individuals within the tourism industry to ensure that steps are taken to **improve education, service standards, training and attitudes** if we are to benefit in any way from the world’s largest industry.
Definitions of Ecotourism

Although touted as a new term, it was in fact first coined by Hector Ceballos-Lascurain in the early 1960’s. Now, ecotourism has become a buzz-word of the tourism industry, as people become more environmentally aware.

Because of inaccurate definitions of what ecotourism means, and what responsibilities are required of those that are involved in the industry, the industry (and the concept) runs the risk of losing credibility.

This is mostly the result of profit-seeking organisations cashing in on the new acceptance of ecotourism by the public and using the environment of tourism destinations in a non-sustainable way.

The term ‘ecotourism’ has been used interchangeably with a host of other terms, not all of which accurately reflect its true meaning. Ecotourism has variously been described as a product, a destination and as an experience, and has also been used to reduce the feelings of guilt associated with some forms of tourism and travel.

Words and phrases such as environmentally sensitive, quality, green, responsible, low impact, ecologically or environmentally responsible, nature based, appropriate, alternative, soft, environmentally friendly and others have all been used (often incorrectly) to promote the image of travel companies and of their products (Hattingh 1994).

It is impossible to define accurately what ecotourism is, but it generally refers to:

“Any aspirational form of tourism which simultaneously conveys value to natural resources, resident communities in visited destinations and the visitors themselves - without any of the negative and damaging implications inevitably associated with poorly managed mass tourism.” (Bennett)

To determine more accurately what may be classified as ecotourism and what is simply tourism with an “eco” flavour, various definitions have been applied

The Ecotourism Society defines it thus:

“It includes purposeful travel to natural areas to understand the cultural and natural history of the environment taking care not to alter the integrity of the ecosystem, while producing economic opportunities that make conservation of natural resources beneficial to local people.”
The University of Pretoria Centre for Ecotourism defines it as:

"An enlightening, participatory travel experience in environments, natural or cultural or both, that contributes to the conserving of these environments by generating sustainable economic opportunities of direct benefit to the local people, and maximises use of environmentally sound infrastructure."

Considering how the term is used, those who have completed the Ecology Modules will remember that 'eco' was derived from the Greek work 'oikos' meaning 'home' or 'place where you live'. How much meaning does the term 'ecotourism' have now?

**Fundamental to the concept of ecotourism are the following key principles:**

- It should not degrade the resources and should be developed in an environmentally sound manner.
- It should provide first-hand, participatory and enlightening experiences.
- It should involve education among all parties before, during and after the trip.
- It should encourage all parties involved to recognise the intrinsic values of the resources being marketed.
- It should involve acceptance of the resource on its own terms, and in recognition of its limitations.
- It should promote understanding and involve partnerships between a wide range of players at all levels.
- It should promote moral and ethical responsibilities and behaviour towards the natural and cultural environments by all players.
- It should provide long-term benefits to the resource, the local community and the industry.
- It must involve some form of intentional travel.
A new term

There are a multitude of definitions all claiming to be “Ecotourism”. This has prompted many within the industry to use a better term, one that expresses itself more clearly.

This term is sustainable tourism. It automatically tells you far more than ‘ecotourism’, and isn’t filled with any ambiguity. It also expresses the goal of all tourism, that of sustainability.

For the remainder of this component, the term ecotourism will be continued. However, you must always remember its intended meaning.
Sustainable Development and The Wise Use of Resources in Ecotourism

Tourism has almost always been an environmentally friendly industry, resulting in mostly positive outcomes for tourists, local residents, developers and entrepreneurs.

The negative effects of tourism have, however, come to the fore in recent times. The reason for this is the increase in environmentalism, consumerism and “green consciousness”, as well as a better understanding of the world’s ecosystems.

Previously, the emphasis of tourism was on satisfying the needs of tourists at the expense of the local community and the environment. Current thinking now places the local community and the environment above the immediate satisfaction of tourist needs. (This does not imply, however, that service standards must be relaxed within the industry.)
A Balanced Approach to Tourism

Three basic approaches to tourism have been identified:

The economic approach, in which the activities of tourism must make an economic contribution to the local community that outweighs any negative effect it may have on the same community.

The environmental approach, in which it is recognised that all tourism activities will lead to the eventual deterioration of resources, and that this ultimately leads to the deterioration of the environment and thus to quality of life.

The social approach, which emphasises the negative impact on the residents of the tourist destination, and calls for the reduction of this and a greater recognition of the needs of the local population.

Bennett (1994), emphasises the need for a balanced approach to tourism development based on the three approaches listed above. Such development in order of priority should be based on:

- Conservation and judicious development of the environment
- Consideration for the interests of the local population
- Optimal satisfaction of tourist needs

Conservation and Judicious Development of the Environment

Without the natural environment, there would be little incentive for travel. It is the natural beauty, scenery, wildlife or pleasant climatic factors that determine which areas become the focus of the tourist industry and thus of tourists.

Changes to these environmental factors are inevitable when an area becomes developed as a tourist attraction. These impacts should, however, never be allowed to be of a cumulative, negative nature, since the overall effect will be one of destroying the very features that made the area desirable as a tourist destination in the first place.

The sustainability of resources within the tourism area thus becomes of prime importance, if overall environmental degradation is to be avoided.
Consideration for the Interests of the Local Population

Tourism development should always go hand-in-hand with the local community. The decision-making process should never be removed from those that stand to gain or lose the most from the impact of tourism within their community. Failure to take these points into consideration can only lead to the deterioration of relations between the tourism developers and the local community.

This theme is well explored in the next component.
Optimal Satisfaction of Tourist Needs

Without disregard for the environment and the needs of the local population, tourist needs can be satisfied more easily by careful selection of the type of tourist that is suited to the destination being marketed. This involves the identification of the needs of tourists, matching these needs to the destination, and thereafter, delivery of a satisfying product to the tourist.