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ECOTOURISM CONCEPT IN THE LIGHT OF CULTURAL DIVERSITY AND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

ABSTRACT

The space, location, possibilities, needs, scarcity of goods, technologies, destination and scope are important in Culture. In this article, the authors begin from the hypothesis: how culture is linked to environment and ecology? As a result, the key ideas of the work presuppose that this link (Ecotourism) defines a contribution to mutual understanding and respect between peoples and societies, a vehicle for individual and collective fulfillment, a user of the cultural heritage of mankind and contributor to its enhancement, a beneficial activity for host countries and the obligations of communities and stakeholders interested in tourism development.

As a research tool, the authors used the library and its resources as well as specialized reference books, reports, catalogues and magazines; the communication facilities and specialty languages were also used. As regards the methods, the authors used the indirect documentation method, *i.e.* the comparative and interpretive method.

Finally, the main expectations following the work are certain proposals in relation to promoting heritage conservation and environment sustainability, so as to create an intellectually challenging and stimulating environment and provide educational benefits to local community. Such objectives are also targeted by the Republic of Moldova.

Key words: Ecotourism, sustainable development and cultural diversity.

JEL Classification: Q01.

1. INTRODUCTION

Tourism is a relatively new social activity that has recently emerged as a global phenomenon. Long before tourists began traipsing all over the world, social interactions involving different cultures usually occurred in the context of commercial trading, wars or migrations. As a result, cultural exchanges were relatively restricted, occurring in specific geographical regions or within the expanding limits of political and military empires.

However, with the advent of technological advances in communications and transportation, a shift in people's attitudes towards travel occurred. People (namely

westerners) began to travel for the sake of traveling, which launched a process of cultural globalization. This process has accelerated in recent decades as a result of further technological breakthroughs in the airplane and information industries.

According to the World Commission on Environment and Development a sustainable development implies **“meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”**. Eco tourism can have many definitions and we can apply this one: “Ideally, ecotourism satisfies several general criteria, including the conservation of biological diversity and cultural diversity through ecosystem protection, promotion of sustainable use of biodiversity, share of socio-economic benefits with local communities through informed consent and participation, increase in environmental and cultural knowledge, affordability and reduced waste, and minimization of its own environmental impact. In such ways, it contributes to the long term benefits to both the environment and local communities.”

Actually Ecotourism creates a triangle of cyclic criteria (See Figure 1)¹:

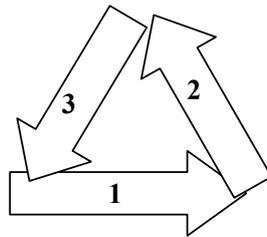


Figure 1. Ecotourism Criteria.

1. Conservation – conserves biological (and cultural) diversity, by strengthening protected area management systems (public or private) and increasing the value of sound ecosystems;

2. Sustainability – promotes the sustainable use of biodiversity, by generating income, jobs and business opportunities in ecotourism and related business networks

3. Biological diversity – shares the benefits of ecotourism developments equitably with local communities and indigenous people, by obtaining their informed consent and full participation in planning and management of ecotourism businesses.

In specialty research works on Ecotourism, the “actors”² are identified as communities, visitors, natural areas (public and private areas), in-bound operators, outbound operators, hotels, restaurants, food providers, NGOs and government.

¹ Retrieved July 22, 2010 from <http://www.travelwebdir.com/travelarticles/Ecotourism---The-Must-be-Principles-1015.html>.

² Retrieved October 11, 2010 from <http://www.fao.org/docrep/w7714e/w7714e06.htm>.

2. MOBILITY AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY

Agenda 21 for Culture (“We, cities and local governments of the world, committed to human rights, cultural diversity, sustainability, participatory democracy and the creation of the conditions for peace, assembled in Barcelona on 7 and 8 May 2004, at the IV Porto Alegre Forum of Local Authorities for Social Inclusion, in the framework of the Universal Forum of Cultures – Barcelona 2004, agree on this Agenda 21 for Culture as a guiding document for our public cultural policies and as a contribution to the cultural development of humanity.”) with its principles 1 and 2 is a real reflection on cultural diversity though mobility issue and its relationship with environment.

Second principle of Agenda (Clear political analogies exist between cultural and ecological questions, as both culture and the environment are common assets of all humanity. The current economic development models, which prey excessively on natural resources and common goods of humanity, are the cause of increasing concern for the environment. Rio de Janeiro 1992, Aalborg 1994, and Johannesburg 2002, have been the milestones in a process of answering one of the most important challenges facing humanity: environmental sustainability. The current situation also provides sufficient evidence that cultural diversity in the world is in danger due to a globalization that standardizes and excludes. UNESCO says: “A source of exchange, innovation and creativity, cultural diversity is as necessary for humankind as biodiversity is for nature”³) reflects the relation between culture and environment. And it is very important to note that even this issue should be seen through the anthropological point of view, where it starts and which the limitations are. Maybe, environment is not always seen as determining factor for culture but rather as limiting factor. Environment influences the social and cultural process and determines individuals to act in such manner to be satisfied, to confront, or to change given environment.

For instance, a real example could be Mark Q. Sutton and Eugene Newton Anderson work: *Introduction to Cultural Ecology* with its relevant ideas that the culture is that one that could make a choice of which of possibilities to employ and not environment. An example could be building a house. Culture chooses materials like wood, iron, stone and other materials and it has a direct impact on the ecology.

So, if we talk about choice then we already mean the relation between culture and possibilism and technology. So culture is not accidental, but is subject of choice. The best choice implies best environment, best ecology. But these choices are available in the environment that can be limited by the capabilities of culture.

Or, environment is the nature; the increasing level of pollution is directly connected to the technology used. Technology is a result and at the same time a promoter of cultural diversity.

³ Article 1, “Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity”, UNESCO.

As a result, the interplay between environment and culture increases the mobility, technical process and diversity of economic patterns.

Now let us think why do we need cultural diversity for human being as biodiversity for living? First, we could say that the level of ecology is related to the multi-linear evolution of culture. This evolution is the result of mobility. Meantime, mobility is the result of technology expression as universal, creativity, specialty and diversity. Technology as it was said before is an expression of miniaturization and portability, people increasingly interacts and form communities: real and virtual. So, culture becomes more and more sophisticated and we already have virtual issue despite of performing arts⁴.

This performance of mobility and technology increases the opportunity cost of cultural diversity and its multi-linear evolution, that directly or indirect has an impact upon environment and its state.

Even the human body is considered as material culture. A demonstrative point could be the fragment from *Introduction to Cultural Ecology* by Mark Q. Sutton and Eugene Newton Anderson: “Biological evolution and natural selection are the forces that shape organism. Beginning sometime in the distant past, culture began to influence human development, changing the relationship of humans to their environment from one of strict biology to a mixture of biology and culture”. Continuing with the same idea, in *Visions of Culture*, by Jerry D. Moore, Bronislaw Malinowski comes to conclusion that “culture is utilitarian, and functionally integrated”, it means that it is culture that determines which set of solutions will be utilized. In addition to meeting the biological needs, culture imposes other needs, thus increases the search, the look for and which is mostly important, the mobility towards satisfaction from consumption. An instrument is represented by technologies that impact the environment in a positive or negative manner. So, practically the human being is forced by his needs to perform technologies to be satisfied. And here we are again confronting the parallelism among cultural diversity, performing technologies, environment and our needs.

To conclude directly with the second principle and its meaning about how culture is linked to environment and ecology we could mention a very important result of this relationship that aims world high level of ecology – ECOTOURISM, which is also linked to mobility. Finally, the Global Code of Ethics for Tourism enacted by the World Tourism Organization (WTO) defines the concept of Ecotourism (Ecological Tourism) as follows:

- A contribution to mutual understanding and respect between peoples and societies
- A vehicle for individual and collective fulfillment

⁴ Selective idea from: HANNAM, K., SHELLER, M. and URRY, J., *Mobilities, immobilities and moorings*, Mobilities, Vol. 1, No. 1, Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, 1–22, March 2006.

- A user of the cultural heritage of mankind and contributor to its enhancement
- A beneficial activity for host countries and obligations of communities and stakeholders interested in tourism development.

3. SUSTAINABLE TOURISM STRATEGIES

For these reasons, the development of a sustainable approach to tourism must be based on strategies that protect and strengthen both natural and cultural diversities. It should avoid the clash of conservation-versus-people — which has become particularly common in Africa. It needs to integrate the rights of local communities to use and manage natural resources. And it should ensure that any profits from tourism are used by the local populations as well as for the conservation of natural resources.

Ecotourism has the potential to help preserve and enrich local indigenous cultures not only on the short term, but also from a transgenerational long-term perspective. The development of a sustainable tourism model could indeed play a valuable role in the development of more sustainable societies worldwide. There are, however, significant risks involved in any tourism or ecotourism initiative. When developing an ecotourism strategy, the vulnerability of the natural or cultural resource being promoted must be carefully assessed to ensure that any planned activities do not threaten or undermine it. Furthermore, it is absolutely critical that local communities, in their struggle for sustainable livelihoods, be involved in integrating ecotourism activities into self-reliance projects that benefit both the community and the natural environment.

“The participants to the World Ecotourism Summit from August-September, 2002 in Johannesburg, aware of the limitations of this consultative process to incorporate the input of the large variety of ecotourism stakeholders, particularly non-governmental organizations and local and indigenous communities:

– Acknowledge that tourism has significant and complex social, economic and environmental implications.

– Consider the growing interest of people in traveling to natural areas.

– Emphasize that ecotourism should contribute to make the overall tourism industry more sustainable, by increasing economic benefits for host communities, actively contributing to the conservation of natural resources and the cultural integrity of host communities, and by increasing awareness of travelers towards the conservation of natural and cultural heritage.

– Recognize the cultural diversity associated with natural areas, particularly because of the historical presence of local communities, of which some have maintained their traditional knowledge, uses and practices many of which have proven to be sustainable over the centuries.

– Reiterate that funding for the conservation and management of biodiverse and culturally rich protected areas has been documented to be inadequate world-wide.

– Recognize further that many of these areas are home to rural peoples often living in poverty, who frequently lack adequate healthcare, education facilities, communications systems, and other infrastructure required for genuine development opportunity.

– Affirm that different forms of tourism, especially ecotourism, if managed in a sustainable manner can represent a valuable economic opportunity for local populations and their cultures and for the conservation and sustainable use of nature for future generations.

– Emphasize that at the same time, wherever and whenever tourism in natural and rural areas is not properly planned, developed and managed, it contributes to the deterioration of natural landscapes, threats to wildlife and biodiversity, poor water quality, poverty, displacement of indigenous and local communities, and the erosion of cultural traditions.

– Acknowledge that ecotourism must recognize and respect the rights of indigenous and local communities, including their protected, sensitive and sacred sites.

– Stress that to achieve equitable social, economic and environmental benefits from ecotourism and other forms of tourism in natural areas, and to minimize or avoid potential negative impacts, participative planning impacts, participative planning mechanisms are needed that allow local and indigenous communities, in a transparent way, to define and regulate the use their areas at the local level, including the right to opt out of tourism development.

– Note that small and micro business seeking to meet social and environmental objectives are often operating in a development climate that does not provide suitable financial and marketing support for this specialized new market, and that to achieve this goal farther understanding for the ecotourism market will be required through market research at the destination level, specialized credit instruments for tourism businesses, grants for external costs, incentives for the use of sustainable energy and innovative technical solutions, and an emphasis on developing skills not only in business but within government and those seeking to support business solutions.”⁵

It is very important to notice that ecotourism has its dimension of measurement and characterization. Thus, the economic dimension is among the most considerable dimensions. But such dimensions as environmental, socio-cultural and experimental are also of great importance for analysis.

⁵ FENNELL, David A. “Ecotourism”, Third edition, Routledge, 2007, 282 pages.

In this context, there are two impacts (See Figure 2)⁶ of tourism or any activity: direct impact – it arises from direct spending, such as money spent at a restaurant and indirect impact – spending that imply spending from other businesses, for instance good bought from other warehouses. Also, wages spending of the restaurant employees for various goods and services are considered induced impacts.

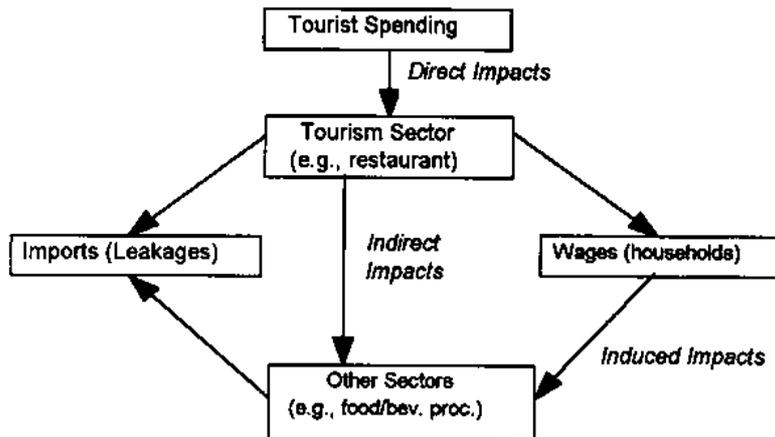


Figure 2. Economic impact of tourism.

At Global level, Ecotourism has grown 20%–34% per year since 1990s. Then since 2004 it has grown by 3 times faster than the tourism industry as a whole. The same source reflects that nature tourism is growing at 10%–12% *per annum* in the international market. Finally, “Sustainable tourism could grow to 25% of the world’s travel market within six years, taking the value of the sector to £ 250 billion (US \$ 473.6 billion) a year”⁷. And from the same source, analysts predict a growth in eco-resorts and hotels, and a boom in nature tourism – a sector already growing at 20% a year – and suggest early converts to sustainable tourism will make market gains.

As regards Europe, “20%–30% of travellers are aware of the needs and values of sustainable tourism, 10%–20% of travellers look for ‘green’ options, 5%–10% of travellers demand ‘green’ holidays. In Germany, 65% (39 million) of travellers expect environmental quality and 42% (25 million) “think that it is particularly important to find environmentally-friendly accommodation” and a survey of US, British, and Australian travellers revealed that 70% would pay up to \$ 150 more for a two-week stay in a hotel with a “responsible environmental attitude”⁸.

⁶ Ecotourism And Other Services Derived From Forests In The Asia-Pacific Region. Retrieved May 13, 2010 from <http://www.fao.org/docrep/w7714e/w7714e06.htm#TopOfPage>.

⁷ Ties Global Ecotourism Fact Sheet, Retrieved May 13, 2010 from <http://www.ecotourism.org/atf/cf/%7B82a87c8d-0b56-4149-8b0a-c4aaced1cd38%7D/TIES%20GLOBAL%20ECOTOURISM%20FACT%20SHEET.PDF>.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

4. SOME BENEFITS OF TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN MOLDOVA

Everything mentioned above is also true for Moldova, because the tourism industry has not fully recovered. It is mainly necessary in the conditions where our country lacks natural resources on one hand, but on the other hand, it has a very important resource, *i.e.* both favorable natural environment and human potential. Unfortunately, ecotourism is still little practiced in our country. Yet other types of tourism are developing – rural tourism, cultural, historical tourism, etc., which promote important values, including environmental conservation. On the base of these types of tourism already in place, there may be special programs that would specifically protect certain areas, such as the natural reserves. Notorious advantage of such tourism is the fact that it can be developed in specific natural environment, contributing to its sustainable development.

Another important advantage is that ecotourism is focused mainly in rural areas, traditionally less-favoured in Moldova, where the population's living standard is significantly lower and, moreover, holds about 60 percent of national habitat. But the massive population exodus from the country occurs on the basis of the rural population (which, according to assessments, tend to figure about 1 million people).

The impact and cultural exchange offered by tourism for a country like ours is also important, which has set the European Union integration as its primary objective. The exchange of tourists leads to the imminent intensification of interpersonal communication and between peoples on the longer time perspective.

Nowadays, the types of tourism that allow environment support and contribute to rural areal development, are alternatives for the rural habitat diversification, maintaining young people in the rural area and providing job opportunities to the native self-assertion.

5. CONCLUSION

It is from this perspective that one can begin to comprehend the cultural impact of international tourism. When tourists arrive at their destination, they bring different beliefs and behaviors with them, which to some extent influence the host culture. At the same time, tourists are changed by their experiences. In short, tourism is an interactive phenomenon, affecting both the hosts and the visitors.

But this effect is lopsided. The influence of tourists on the societies they visit is generally more pronounced than vice versa. The majority of global tourists come from a few affluent countries (dominant cultures), which are relatively unaffected by visitors from smaller local cultures. On the other hand, tourism increases the risk of irreversible cultural and eco-systemic disruptions in smaller societies.

Generally, the ecotourism formulation implies the problem of cultural interaction, as well of cultural impact and vice versa. Sometimes this impact could

be positive, because it enhances the role of ecotourism, its meaning and development. On the other hand its impact could be negative, because it could create the situation when meanings and values are misunderstood.

With regard to the Republic of Moldova, we would like to mention that a substantial contribution for solving the ecotourism development problems can be brought by the financial and information opportunities provided by the Euro-region creation, which have the potential to widen the tourism activities development, also including the ecological tourism. Yet, to reach this purpose, the respective field needs to become a state priority, which will design concrete economic policies and mechanisms to support it (creating a favorable economic environment through incentive tax, preferential credit, proper training of staff to be involved, advertising, etc.).

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