Ecotourism Impacts, Potentials, and Possibilities - Reconsidered after a Decade

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The second edition of this text contains no major changes from the first edition in either structure or content. As noted in the authors’ preface: the bibliography has been updated; each chapter now contains a couple of recommendations for further reading; and there is a new chapter consisting of three case studies. There are 10 chapters in this edition. The first reviews definitions, and the second summarises philosophies. The third introduces policy issues, the fourth considers tourism in parks, the fifth focuses on interpretation, and the sixth looks at links with local communities. Chapter Seven presents case studies of the Kokoda Trail in Papua New Guinea, trekking porters in Nepal, and surf tourism in Indonesia’s Mentawai Islands. The last three chapters cover marketing, tourist motivations, and tourism-based development models. There is also a glossary and a list of websites.

This is very much a teaching text rather than a reference volume, and colleagues who have prescribed it for their courses say that students like it because it is basic and easily understandable. From my own perspective as someone involved in ecotourism research as well as teaching, it does have some deficiencies. The main one is that it is not really up to date. There is new material and references, but the update is far from comprehensive. The examples used and references added are a rather eclectic mix, and they are not always evaluated critically. One gets the impression that in many cases, older materials may have been included just because they were conveniently available. Older
literature is presented as though it were accepted doctrine, without critical comment by these authors themselves.

For example, there is a case study on Australian government policy (p. 42), but it reflects the position in the mid 1990s, with no update or more recent references. There is a case study of the Canadian tourism industry (p. 57) which consists, in its entirety, of a single 38-word sentence drawn from a decade-old consultant report. There is a case study of funding for US national parks (p. 67) where both the budget numbers and the political context are from 1997, more than a decade ago. If nothing has changed, why a new edition? And if a new edition is needed, why is it not fully updated?

The lack of critical evaluation is also shown in the reproduction of text sections drawn from proprietary marketing materials, as on p. 85 and p. 129. These may or may not be reliable, but we would mark our students down for such uncritical citation from non-academic sources. Surely, then, we should not set them a bad example within a textbook itself. There are also statements which may be correct in a limited context, but as generalisations are simply wrong. On p. 93, for example, there is a quote claiming that ‘[park] user fees … cover management costs’. In fact, however, this is quite rare. Whilst there are indeed some parks which derive substantial proportions of their revenue from fees, it is much more commonplace that user fees barely cover administration costs for the fee collection system.

Of the three case studies presented in Chapter 7, it happens that I have some familiarity with two. No doubt there have indeed been many historical and indeed contemporary cases where porters have not been well treated, and not only in Nepal. Equally, however, there are many cases where porters are well paid, well treated, and later invite their clients to visit their own villages as friends. Our own student field courses in
Nepal, for example - hardly an upmarket tourist product – pay porters several times the rates quoted in this volume.

The case study of the Mentawais is couched in somewhat political terms and ignores both history and context. Of course, the rights of local inhabitants should be respected. But current residents of the Mentawai coastlines and coral islands are not the indigenous inhabitants: they are historical colonists from elsewhere in Indonesia who pushed the original Mentawai peoples into the forested uplands of the larger islands such as Pulau Siberut. Copra is not a subsistence crop: it is a colonial-era cash crop which is now of very low value, unless grown and processed at boutique quality for the cosmetics industry. The move from boat-based to land-based surf tourism operations was made in part at the urging of the Mentawai local government, specifically to provide financial connections for local residents. And the Mentawai Islands are under far greater threat from logging, oil-palm plantations and industrial fisheries than they are from surf tourism. Certainly, there are individual surf tourism operators which have behaved badly toward each other, towards locals, and towards the Mentawai government. This would also apply, however, for tourism development everywhere in the world. So whilst this case study is no doubt correct to draw attention to the concerns of the local inhabitants, it does not provide a proper context for those concerns to be evaluated. Instead, it presents a stereotypical caricature of rapacious tour operators and victimised locals. It does not even analyse the internal disputes within the surf tourism sector, which have been a key issue in their attempts to acquire land-based development rights.

The criticisms raised above do not imply that the book as a whole is weak. It is indeed a solid presentation of its authors’ views, albeit somewhat eclectic and idiosyncratic. My concern is that this second edition does not always display the level of scholarship that we want to inculcate in our students. For an uncritical student, perhaps that does not
matter: they may not pay attention anyway. But some at least of our ecotourism students are both highly intelligent and highly motivated, and they will graduate to work in ecotourism research, professional practice or interpretation. Should we not be careful to provide them with the best possible models to emulate? If I were reading this edition as a student, I should find it hard to separate fact from opinion, history from present practice, questions from conclusions. There is a great deal of good material in this volume, but many of the new additions seem to be tacked on to the original structure rather than woven fully into the fabric.

But perhaps, in any event, we are all taking ourselves too seriously. My favourite sentence in this book is a quote (p. 122) taken from a 2007 article by Stroma Cole, published in *Annals of Tourism Research* 34: 943-960. It notes that for villagers on the island of Flores in Indonesia, tourists are welcome because … wait for it … they provide entertainment for the locals! And in conclusion, I note that the front cover of this new second edition features a pair of zebra, and the same image is repeated at the start of each new chapter. It is intriguing to speculate what wildlife triad may grace the pages of any future third edition: the three penguins from the movie *Madagascar*, perhaps? Just as long as it is not the legendary 3-L Ilama.