



## **Ecotourism - Comparative Book Review**

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## **Ecotourism- Comparative Book Review**

Ralf C. Buckley

**Bruce Prideaux (Ed): Rainforest Tourism, Conservation and Management. Challenges for Sustainable Development.** Oxford: Routledge, 2014, (ISBN 978-0-415-63582-0) \$145.00 (hardback), 321 pages.

**Robert Fletcher, Romancing the Wild. Cultural Dimensions of Ecotourism.** Durham: Duke University Press 2014. ISBN 978-0-8223-5583-0, \$89.95 (paperback). 248 pages.

These two books take very different approaches to a similar set of topics, providing a study in academic contrasts. Prideaux's edited volume does not say it is about ecotourism, but in practice it is. Fletcher's monograph says it is about ecotourism, but in practice it isn't.

Prideaux's book is a solid collection of well-documented cases presented in a straightforward and comprehensive way, providing a reference work that readers can use as a baseline for the future. The 21 chapters comprise contributions from 32 authors, most from Australia and the UK, but also from Canada, Chile, France, Japan, Malaysia, Papua New Guinea, Qatar, Thailand and Uganda, presenting case studies from 12 countries including Australia, Madagascar, Peru, Brazil, Guatemala, Jamaica, Papua New Guinea (PNG), Guyana, Malaysia, Uganda and Indonesia. Tropical, subtropical and cool temperate rainforests are all included, though none are covered in a geographically comprehensive way. The sites and issues addressed are summarized in an introductory table (pp. 23–25).

The volume is organised into four parts. The first introduces the topic of tourism in rainforest regions. The second sets out potential threats from climate change in Australia and forest clearance in Madagascar. Additional threats – e.g., from invasive species – are also covered in later chapters. Part three presents 10 case studies of small-scale commercial tourism products, most including local communities. Some of these cases are well known, such as Tambopata in Peru; others, such as Grace Gaigu's report on Ulumani Lodge in Milne Bay, PNG, present new research. Part four provides case studies specifically including wildlife: birdwatching in the Arfak Mountains of West Papua, primates in Uganda, and seven threatened species in Borneo. There is also a chapter on feral pigs, although, since these are a

conservation threat rather than a tourist attraction, it might perhaps more logically have been included in part two.

The key theme in many of the chapters is that different stakeholders may have very different perspectives on appropriate uses of natural resources. In Madagascar, local residents traditionally relied on the forests for subsistence and want continued access, whereas conservation NGOs are concerned about large-scale industrial or illegal logging and wildlife hunting (p.94). There are analogous differences in stakeholder perspectives in southern Chile (p.137). At Waluma in PNG (p.209), whilst academics may lobby for bottom-up community-owned approaches, local communities themselves see this as a recipe for failure. The second PNG case study, in contrast, shows how a small private lodge has survived through highly valued specialist attractions, such as eclectus parrots, and good local connections. As with many edited volumes, the contributing authors take different approaches, but here the most frequent focus is on community-based ecotourism, and perhaps this is the main strength of the book.

Fletcher's book provides a strong contrast. It is a monograph, a dense mix of personal experience and various theoretical concepts. Fletcher labels his research auto-ethnographic. I agree that auto-ethnographic approaches, or as he also refers to it (p.18), "*verstehen* research", can provide valuable data and insights (Buckley 2015). Fletcher's interest is in how ecotourism is embedded in culture and his approach adds to a growing body of research in both ecotourism and auto-ethnography. While some of his conclusions are well supported, I would question some that he seems to have extrapolated from limited field data. His examples are drawn largely from white-water rafting tours, a potentially fruitful field for research (Buckley 2009, 2010a), but as adventure rather than ecotourism (Weaver 2014). In addition, his examples are drawn only from the Americas.

Fletcher relies heavily on the anthropological research literature, and ignores much of the academic literature on ecotourism in the journals of tourism and environmental science. Perhaps in consequence, a number of his conclusions are not as novel as he suggests. Examples include analysis of the emotional labour of guides, examined previously by Sharpe (2005); hostile local takeovers of ecotourism enterprises from the foreigners who established them (Buckley 2006); and efforts to improve local attitudes to conservation by taking politicians and other influential people on river trips (Buckley 2010b).

Some of Fletcher's claims seem to be unduly sweeping, or simply incorrect. He says (p. 16) that he is the only author to analyse how ecotourism is embedded in culture, but see Cater (2006), or Stronza and Durham (2008), or Buckley et al. (2008). On p. 91 he states that ecotourism "is strongly associated with the counterculture". Some of the world's top-ranked and most expensive hotels, however, very much mainstream, are ecolodges. He argues (p. 53) that rafting tours are run and guided by white males. This ignores the many expert raft and kayak guides who are female, and the many who are African, Indian or Chinese.

Overall, Fletcher's book is idiosyncratic, with interesting ideas but a number of inaccuracies. It is unlikely to "become the key scholarly reference in contemporary studies of ecotourism", as suggested by one of the shorter, somewhat misleading, back-cover publicity quotes. Nor can I agree with the main back-cover quote, which says that "participation in rigorous outdoor activities resonates with the particular values of the white, upper-middle-class Westerners who are the majority of ecotourists". This ignores the considerable cultural diversity of tourists, for example, those who seek to climb major mountain peaks including Mt Everest.

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