

A Trip Too Far: Ecotourism, Politics & Exploitation

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Published

2003

Journal Title

Journal of Ecotourism

DOI

[10.1080/14724040308668141](https://doi.org/10.1080/14724040308668141)

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A Trip Too Far: Ecotourism, Politics & Exploitation

R. Duffy. London: Earthscan Publications Ltd, 2002. Pp. 210. ISBN 1 85383 759 8
£15.95, AU\$46.70.

The bottom line of Duffy's argument is that ecotourism is bad, in the sense that its actual effects are the opposite of those that its exponents set out to achieve. Some of what she says is very interesting, some very irritating. Her argument is weak, but her thesis could still prove correct, and should certainly not be dismissed.

The book is entirely about Belize, though its title gives no warning of this. No doubt this ambiguity was at the insistence of the publisher's marketing department. Its author lectures in politics at an English University. Essentially, she argues that international visitors to beach resorts and dive tours in Belize contribute unwittingly to large-scale organised crime and closely-linked government corruption; and that this reduces the chance of establishing a homeland for the Mayan peoples of Central America, whom ecotourism is intended to benefit.

If this thesis is true, it would certainly merit further investigation, and comparable studies in other countries. Unfortunately, even after reading this book several times I don't feel I can make an informed judgement as to whether it is true or not, for a number of reasons.

Duffy's raw data are derived almost entirely from personal interviews, many of them anonymous, and from articles in local newspapers of dubious provenance. The interviews were informal conversations with anyone willing to talk, as a more formal approach proved fruitless. Indeed, we must

sympathise with the author when she reports that tourists pushed a lemon in her mouth and a camera down her teeshirt – though we may be a little surprised that she decided to tell us about it. The newspaper quotes do not seem to come from any quantitative analysis of topics or content, so we cannot tell if they were selected to support a particular point of view. So Duffy's study is essentially investigative journalism. There's nothing wrong with that: indeed, for the issue under study it is probably the only tool available. Politics lecturer and political journalist, however, are rather different skills; and Duffy seems more familiar with the former, to judge from her heavy use of political jargon and her constant outrage at political commonplaces.

The second difficulty lies with the logic. Duffy seems to assume that just because tour operators market some destinations in Belize as ecotourism, all foreign visitors to Belize should behave as stereotypical ecotourists. This is particularly surprising since she seems to have interviewed people in beach resorts and dive tours, not in the ruins or rainforests. She seems disgruntled (p. 33) to find that her interviewees still want, to paraphrase Wheeler, to get a tan, get drunk, get laid and get back to the hotel. She seems particularly upset that some white female tourists appear to visit Belize unaccompanied, specifically to have sex with local black or Hispanic men, referred to as vacation boyfriends (p. 34). But how is this relevant to ecotourism? It has no consequences for local ecosystems whether bonking humans are married or not. And who says they are ecotourists anyway? Not, apparently, the tourist themselves. Indeed, in Chapter 5, Duffy argues that the Toledo region, which has marketed itself successfully as an ecotourism destination, has done so only because its beaches and reefs don't match up to those in other regions. But if I read correctly, it seems to be the beach and reef tourists in those other regions whom she has interviewed about ecotourism.

The political jargon is particularly dense in the introductory chapters, whose titles include phrases such as 'green greed' and 'misery and self-indulgence.' These chapters seem to be a broad but somewhat shallow literature review of popular themes in the ecopolitics of tourism. The aim of the book, apparently (p. 8), is to prove that ecotourism is a 'blue-green' (capitalist) commercial business with a political context, not a cost-free 'red-green' (neo-Marxist) form of 'radical sustainable development' or a 'deep-green' form of 'ecocentricity.' I hesitate to quote Homer Simpson here. But surely this thesis, in so far as it refers to real-world practicalities rather than definitional semantics, is already very well established. Even if it were not, a single case study from Belize could hardly establish it on its own; particularly if it focuses on mainstream beach and reef tourism sector.

The interesting part of the book starts with descriptions of actual events in Belize. The politics of powerful families, major engineering works for reef resorts, impacts of tourism on reefs and manatees, links between tourism and organised crime, and competition between regions and countries in international markets: these are all familiar messages from many nations worldwide, but case studies such as this are always a welcome addition to the literature.

Internationally known ecotourism destinations such as the Cockscomb Basin Jaguar Sanctuary and the Toledo Ecotourism Association receive a mention, but also receive criticism. Even the role of international

environmental NGOs is criticised (p. 121). According to Duffy, 'community-based ecotourism has become intimately bound up with one of the most politicised issues in Central America' (p. 113) – namely, demands for the establishment of a Mayan homeland. There is an interesting discussion of the politics (pp. 104–125) including logging, highways, land speculation, international borders, illegal immigrants, plant smuggling, Internet casinos, and alleged murders of community activists. Just like most of the world, in fact. The border with Guatemala seems to be particularly critical. Guatemalan poachers in speedboats, for example, kill manatees in Belize. Sounds like a job for the Belizean navy, if there is one.

The story hots up further in Chapter 6, with drug smuggling, money laundering, illegal trafficking of Mayan artefacts (p. 127), and especially the discussion of shadow states on pp. 128 onwards: 'how political elites use information and invisible networks to exercise political and economic power.' Duffy seems somewhat apologetic in applying this concept in Belize; but to me, it seems applicable worldwide, with differences only in degree and means.

Perhaps the critical sentence (p. 132) is: 'ecotourism is part of a wider arena of legitimate business interests that intersects with illicit networks sustained by political corruption and global chains of traffickers.' Arguably, anyone anywhere who uses money at all has some such link; but for most of us (hopefully) the link is remote. Duffy's real thesis, it seems to me, is that in Belize, tourism has closer links to crime than in other countries. She tells the tale of one Michael Ashcroft, Belizean citizen, owner of various banks and Treasurer of the UK Conservative Party. Ashcroft was reported in *The Times* of London as under investigation by the US Drugs Enforcement Agency. He sued *The Times*, but dropped the case after 'direct discussions with Rupert Murdoch, owner of the parent company News International' (p. 136). Now wouldn't that have been an interesting conversation to overhear...

According to Duffy (p. 137) 'tourism is often associated with an increase in crime, prostitution and drugs.' When the US Counter-Narcotics Unit visited Customs at the Port of Belize, their 'sniffer dogs were so overwhelmed by the smell of drugs that they suffered sensory overload and were unable to function' (p. 138). And there are various reports of individuals buying island resorts using cash from drug trafficking. Fishermen near the Mexican border, apparently, not uncommonly encounter floating bodies – or if they are luckier, floating bales of cocaine. This is known locally as 'winning the sea lotto' (p. 141). Presumably, the floating bodies have lost the sea lotto.

The core of Duffy's thesis is developed on pp. 141–153, 'The Impact of the Shadow State on Ecotourism Policy,' which describes a series of dubious development approvals and similar events. Duffy's conclusion (p. 159) is that tourists visit Belize to see reefs, rainforests and ruins, and also to drink, take drugs and have sex; but because of links between tourism and the shadow state, their mere presence creates a spiral of impacts on the social and natural environment of which they are not aware and over which they have no control. Ecotourism in Southern Belize, she says, can only be analysed in the context of international financial institutions, environmental NGOs, logging companies, and illegal traffic in drugs and wildlife.

These are not trivial conclusions, so they are worth considering carefully. First, are these conclusions actually correct; and secondly, if they are true for Belize, are they true elsewhere? Commonly, ecotourism is put forward as a means to reduce illegal logging, overfishing, wildlife poaching, encroachment on protected areas, and exploitation of local cultures. And there do seem to be examples in other countries where it has been successful. Do we need to re-examine every ecotourism success story worldwide in the light of the shadow state?

Possibly: but don't panic, would be my call. For reasons outlined earlier, Duffy's argument is a persuasive story rather than a proven case. It is easy enough to believe the broad arguments about shadow states, because that is basically business as usual worldwide. But if I understand correctly, Duffy seems to be pushing her data to much more detailed and dubious conclusions. Her argument seems to be that environmental and community groups that helped to establish ecotourism operations in the Toledo region, and the tourists who now visit those operations, have inadvertently helped to support a shadow state that is preventing the establishment of a multi-nation Mayan homeland. This is not impossible, but it is certainly unproven. It is not really clear, however, if that is what the book was seriously trying to prove, or more of an afterthought.

After ploughing through the first half of this paperback, I was ready to dismiss it as a rather puerile piece of political polemic. The second half, however, was far more entertaining and makes a very readable story of tourism politics in Central America. Perhaps it does not tell us a great deal about ecotourism; but it does tell us about shadow-state politics in tourism, in a way which might encourage us all to look for parallels from our own countries. So yes, I do think it is worth reading; but you might want to start in the middle somewhere, and skip back to the beginning later on.

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