

Unpacking the Baggage of Ecotourism: Nature, Science, and Local Participation

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Ecotourism has arisen as a popular strategy for merging the interests of environmental conservation and development. One way of analyzing ecotourism is to consider how this linkage between environment and development is constructed in various environmental discourses to promote ecological, economic, and/or human interests. Although a variety of definitions and discursive models of ecotourism are circulated among academic circles, non-governmental organizations, and multi-lateral institutions, ecotourism remains an ambiguous term that allows actors to speak the same language while pursuing different objectives. Following an assessment of the discourses of ecotourism, this paper explores three of its underlying assumptions. First, the dominant vision of nature upheld through ecotourism is critiqued as an enforcement of western environmental values. Second, the presumed authority of conservation scientists is examined. Finally, the promotion of local involvement and participation is criticized for its concealment of the uneven distribution of power and benefits among institutions and social groups that occurs in practice. It is only if and when these assumptions are questioned that an 'ideal' form of ecotourism might be possible.

Keywords: Conservation, development, ecotourism, and environmental discourse

Over the past 15 years there has been a gradual merging of development and conservation, in both discourse and practice. In terms of discourse, the rise of 'sustainable development' has conceptually integrated the environment into discussions of development, while conservationists have increasingly recognized the rights and influence of people living in biologically valuable areas, and have begun to discuss human as well as biological needs. In terms of practice, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), bilateral and multilateral aid agencies, governments, academics and others have recognized the need to address both conservation and development objectives simultaneously, leading to the implementation of projects and policies with a dual focus on both humans and the environment. Ecotourism, the segment of the tourism industry that claims to involve socially, economically, and ecologically 'sustainable' travel to natural areas, is in many ways the progeny of this marriage between conservation and development. This paper will explore the conceptual fusion of 'environment' and 'development,' considering

how this linkage is constructed in different environmental discourses. Ecotourism, particularly as it is promoted and conceptualized by conservationists, will be analyzed in terms of its problematic understandings of nature, local involvement and the role of scientific expertise. Central to this analysis will be the idea of power, as it is used and abused, critiqued and contested. The future of ecotourism, an idea still in its infancy, will largely depend on who has the power to define the meaning of 'environment' and 'development,' in both global discourses and local contexts.

Discourses of Environment and Development

Although the merging of environment and development discourses has been underway since the 1960s (Adams 1998), the defining moment in this process is often cited as the 1987 publication of *Our Common Future* by the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), the report that popularized the term 'sustainable development' (Escobar 1995; Adams 1998; Sachs 1999). The definition of sustainable development offered by the WCED is 'development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' (WCED, 1987). The significant achievement of sustainable development as it was envisioned in the WCED report is the recasting of development from enemy to friend of the environment. Whereas earlier criticisms of development had admonished its destructive impacts on both people and nature, now "development has come to be seen as the therapy for the injuries caused by development" (Sachs 1999, 34). The concept of development has not been fundamentally altered; it has simply been stretched to account for previous ecological oversights (Sachs 1999). This new and improved version of development recognizes two key problems. First, business as usual is destroying the environmental conditions that it is dependent upon, a failure that is discussed in Marxist terms as the second contradiction of capitalism (Escobar 1995). Second, poverty and environmental degradation are mutually reinforcing, such that one leads to the other in a vicious downward spiral (Sachs 1999). The reconceptualization of development as 'sustainable' does not question development itself, only the

strategies by which it is pursued. The logic of sustainable development dictates that in order to prevent the destruction of the resource base, for both industry and the rural poor, there is a need to better integrate the environment into economic structures and decision-making (Adams 1998). It is therefore development and its associated institutions, not the environment, that is being sustained (Escobar 1995; Sachs 1999). The connection between the environment and poverty is critical to the reconfiguration of development, as those who have traditionally dealt with issues of poverty find their mandate expanded to include the environment, while those who have focused on environmental issues now incorporate human needs into their agenda; the work of both groups is increasingly directed by a neoliberal agenda that emphasizes the role of the market in achieving both development and environment objectives.

One of the more important consequences of the global rhetoric of sustainable development is the commodification of nature (McAfee 1999). McAfee uses the term 'green developmentalism' to describe this commoditization process, in which capitalism expands its reach to offer nature the opportunity to pay for itself on the global market (McAfee 1999). Ecotourism is a perfect example of 'green developmentalism,' offering a market-based approach for the pursuit of both conservation and development. However, ecotourism is also touted for its ability to contribute to local empowerment and participatory development at a grassroots level. Thus, an uneasy alliance is formed between those who promote ecotourism for nature's sake, those who promote ecotourism as a profit generator, and those who promote ecotourism for the benefit of local people; each of these groups can adopt the same strategy of ecotourism for very different reasons. It is helpful to consider this intersection of interests around ecotourism in terms of environmental discourses.

Adger et al. (2001), in their review of the literature around four environmental issues (deforestation, desertification, climate change, and loss of biodiversity), identify two prominent environmental discourses. The dominant managerial discourse blames local people, poverty, and overpopulation for environmental degradation and suggests that the solution to environmental problems lies in international environmental agreements and regulations, market-based incentives,

compensation payments, and technology and knowledge transfers. Ecotourism is valued in this discourse because it offers an economic incentive for conservation, consistent with the aims of the Convention on Biological Diversity (UNEP 2002). In contrast, the alternative populist discourse targets the imbalance of power perpetuated by postcolonialism, globalization, and capitalism as the root of environmental problems, identifying “rights, justice, self-determination and empowerment” (Adger et al. 2001, 705) as the long-term solutions to environmental problems. While the two discourses differ in terms of the actors and processes identified, it is important to note that both the managerial and the populist discourse could conceivably propose ecotourism as an appropriate strategy for development and environmental management.

In a similar discussion of discourses of sustainable development in Costa Rica, Nygren (1998) describes four environmental discourses: environmentalism for profit, environmentalism for nature, environmentalism for the people, and alternative environmentalism. She separates discourses based on their underlying imperative, their aims, and their strategies for environmental problem solving. A combination of the first two discourses, ‘environmentalism for nature’ and ‘environmentalism for profit,’ approximately correspond to the global managerial discourse outlined by Adger et al. (2001), while

‘environmentalism for the people,’ is equivalent to Adger et al.’s populist discourse. Alternative environmentalism is less prominent than the other three discourses, and will therefore be ignored for the purposes of this paper. In the view of ‘environmentalism for nature,’ the problem is deforestation by peasants, which can be solved by establishing protected areas that exclude people thereby protecting the forests as well as the biodiversity they contain (Nygren 1998). Proponents of ‘environmentalism for profit’ also view the problem as deforestation and biodiversity loss, but suggest that the solution lies in market-based approaches, including the promotion of ecotourism, bioprospecting, and alternative forest and agriculture products, that offer economic incentives for conservation (Nygren 1998). ‘Environmentalism for the people’ presents the problem of environmental degradation, which affects peasant livelihood, as the result of the complex interaction of state policy, land tenure issues, and international agricultural commodity production. The solution offered by this discourse combines local empowerment with activities such as agroforestry and ecotourism, in order to meet the needs of local people while protecting the environment that they depend upon for their livelihood (Nygren 1998). Figure 1 summarizes these different discourses and illustrates how ecotourism can be incorporated into all of them simultaneously, yet for different reasons.

Discourse (Adger <i>et al.</i> , 2001)	Discourse (Nygren, 1998)	Imperatives	Aims	Strategies	Role for Ecotourism?
Global Managerial Discourse	Environmentalism for Nature	Ecological	Environmental care	Interventionist authority	Ecotourism depends on 'pristine wilderness,' justifies its legal protection
	Environmentalism for Profit	Economic	Capitalization of nature	Neoliberal globalization	Ecotourism is one way to make conservation profitable
Populist Discourse	Environmentalism for the People	Humanist	Local- sensitive development	Idealist grassroots participation	Ecotourism provides income to meet local human needs while protecting resources

Figure 1: Framework of environmental discourses

Source: Adapted from Adger *et al.* (2001) and Nygren (1998).

Neither static nor monologic, these discourses “constantly overlap and redefine each other” (Adger et al. 2001, 705). The managerial discourse, for example, has increasingly incorporated populist ideas of community-based conservation and resource management into its rhetoric (Adger et al. 2001), a phenomenon that will be discussed in relation to ecotourism.

Ecotourism

Ecotourism is part of the broader category of alternative tourism, which arose in the 1980s and 1990s partially in response to the negative sociocultural, economic, and ecological impacts of mass tourism. Such impacts include uneven distribution of economic benefits, economic leakage of profits from host communities back to transnational companies, deforestation, soil erosion and wildlife disturbance, and social and cultural degradation (Mowforth and Munt 1998; Weaver 1998). The difference between mass tourism and alternative tourism is a concern for who benefits from tourism and who endures its negative impacts, a “shift in focus from the well-being of the tourist industry to the well-being of the host community” (Weaver 1998, 31). However, ecotourism was not a universal, consistent response to the problems of mass tourism; it arose in a variety of places for a variety of reasons. Honey (1999) identifies four historical roots of ecotourism: “(1) scientific, conservation, and nongovernmental organization (NGO) circles; (2) multilateral aid institutions; (3) developing countries; and (4) the travel industry and traveling public” (Honey 1999, 11). The travel industry is a difficult source to examine, given the problem of ‘greenwashing,’ where an increasing number of (tour) companies are labeling their product as ‘green’ or ‘eco’ as a marketing tactic (Weaver 1998; Ross and Wall 1999). There are, however, a few tour operators that are motivated by a genuine interest in ecological and social responsibility (Honey 1999). Multilateral aid institutions and developing countries are focusing on ecotourism as an alternative to more traditional development strategies. For institutions such as the World Bank and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), ecotourism offers an opportunity to green their image while continuing with large-scale economic development projects, or business as usual (Honey 1999). Developing countries such as Costa Rica and Kenya are

increasingly pursuing ecotourism as a national development strategy to supply much needed foreign exchange earnings. In the 1990s, nature-based tourism and ecotourism surpassed bananas in Costa Rica and coffee in Kenya as the largest foreign exchange earner (Honey 1999). For both multilateral institutions and developing country governments, ecotourism fits into the global managerial or ‘environmentalism for profit’ discourse (see Figure 1). Ecotourism in this sense is not really an alternative so much as it is an expansion of capitalist development into the realm of nature. This is what McAfee (1999) refers to as green developmentalism, in which nature is a postmodern commodity. In contrast, ecotourism as it emerged from the scientific and NGO community is more consistent with the ‘environmentalism for nature’ and ‘environmentalism for people’ discourses, representing a hybrid of the two views. It is this version of ecotourism that will be the primary focus of critique in this paper, mainly because it seems to offer the most promise for local people, although representations of ecotourism from a variety of sources will be considered.

There is no commonly accepted definition of ecotourism, a problem that has been discussed by several authors (Weaver 1998; Ross and Wall 1999; Wearing and Neil 1999). Most authors agree, however, that ecotourism is more than just ‘nature-based tourism’, or travel to ‘natural’ areas; it must also have both ecological benefits and socio-economic benefits for local people (Ross and Wall 1999). A popular definition states that ecotourism is:

Environmentally responsible travel and visitation to relatively undisturbed natural areas, in order to enjoy and appreciate nature (and any accompanying cultural features – both past and present) that promotes conservation, has low visitor impact, and provides for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local populations (Ceballos-Lascurain 1996, 20).

Conservation and local involvement are not just elements of the academic discussion of ecotourism; they are also critical components of the ecotourism discourse circulated by international organizations such as the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the World Tourism Organization (WTO). The United Nations, recognizing its ‘global importance,’ declared 2002 the International Year of Ecotourism

(WTO 2002). Ecotourism, according to these global actors, generally includes the following: travel to natural areas; educational and interpretive components; small groups of tourists; predominantly locally owned businesses; low natural and cultural impacts; protection of natural areas; and local economic benefits (WTO 2002). It is promoted by UNEP as a development tool that can support the three basic goals of the Convention on Biological Diversity: conservation of biological diversity, the sustainable use of biodiversity, and the equitable sharing of benefits derived from biodiversity (UNEP 2002). In the UNEP vision of ecotourism, biodiversity is conserved in strengthened protected area systems that attract ecotourists, the sustainable use of biodiversity is achieved through tourism-generated income, jobs, and business networks, and the equitable sharing of the benefits of biodiversity is realized by obtaining the “informed consent and full participation” of local communities and indigenous people (UNEP 2002). In a win-win-win formula that gives power simultaneously to state institutions, the market *and* local people, UNEP manages to appeal to all of the discourses illustrated in Figure 1, without acknowledging any potential contradictions or conflicts. By playing this discursive trick, it is possible to imply that ecotourism will serve the interests of all stakeholders. The question, then, is how overlapping discourses of environment and sustainable development are translated into location-specific ecotourism practices that will invariably distribute power and benefits to specific groups.

Ecotourism, particularly as it is envisioned by those who promote a hybrid of the ‘environmentalism for the people’ and ‘environmentalism for nature’ discourses, serves to reinforce rather than challenge the uneven distribution of power in three ways. First, western ideas and values of nature and landscapes are reproduced in and forced on tourist destinations, demanding that communities in the developing world assume responsibility for the protection of the ‘global’ environment. The privileging of western environmental values is an important, often unquestioned assumption of ecotourism. Second, the emphasis on conservation means that control may be allocated to conservation scientists rather than to local people. Although conservation scientists are increasingly embracing community-based conservation strategies such as ecotourism in place of traditional, people-free approaches, they do not necessarily

include the views or desires of local people in their planning. Sold as a development strategy, ecotourism is often a (western) conservation strategy masquerading as development. Third, the ambiguity of the terms ‘local involvement’ and ‘local benefits’ allows for a wide range of interpretations, which may or may not empower local people. The homogenization of ‘local people’ and ‘local communities’ that occurs in discursive constructions of ecotourism conceals the uneven distribution of power and benefits among social groups that usually occurs in practice. The purpose of exploring these three aspects of ecotourism is not to suggest that local people have no power, or that their role is prescribed in a process of ‘discursive determination’ (Moore 2000), but to consider the ways in which the conceptualization of ecotourism shapes particular outcomes and power dynamics.

The ‘Nature’ of Ecotourism

Critiques of tourism have often centered on the idea that tourism is a form of imperialism (Mowforth and Munt 1998). One of the first of this type of critique is offered by Nash (1977), who discusses both the structure of the tourism industry and encounters between ‘hosts’ and ‘guests’ in touristic interactions in terms of imperialism. Using dependency theory, Nash (1977) explains how metropolitan centers in the developed world act as the core, generating both the demand for tourism and the tourists themselves, while tourist destinations in the developing world are at the periphery. While Nash acknowledges that locations on the periphery may initiate or collaborate on tourist development, he asserts that they must always rely on the needs and demands of the metropolitan core. Tourism is therefore characterized by a fundamentally uneven distribution of power, between hosts and guests, sources and destinations. One of the claims of alternative forms of tourism is that they overcome this power imbalance, seeking to mitigate the impacts of tourism on hosts and to return control to local people (Mowforth and Munt 1998). Yet ecotourism can simply disguise the imperialist tendencies of tourism under the cloak of environmentalism. Ecotourism is no more than eco-imperialism, demanding that host destinations supply and comply with tourists’ perceptions of nature (Mowforth and Munt 1998).

In order to qualify as ecotourism, the destination and main attraction for the tourist must be a 'natural' area (Wearing and Neil 1999), typically a pristine place that shows no sign of human activity. Costa Rica, a country renowned for ecotourism (Weaver 1998; Honey 1999), promotes this image of pristine nature in its official tourism advertisements and promotional material, under the slogan "No Artificial Ingredients" (Costa Rica Tourist Board 2002). Implicit in the promotion, definition, and discussion of ecotourism is a specific understanding of nature. The use of images of lush forests to market Costa Rica as a tourist destination, and the conspicuous absence of humans or signs of human activity from these images (except for tourists!) is no accident (see Figure 2).

This edenic image of people-free nature is rooted firmly in a Western conception of nature as something separate and distinct from humans. The nature-culture dichotomy, which has its roots in the scientific revolution of the sixteenth centuries (Merchant 1998), finds its most powerful current

incarnation in the American idea of wilderness as an uninhabited place separate from human civilization (Cronon 1995; Nash



Figure 2 : Ecotourism advertisement by the Costa Rican Tourist Board
 Source: Canadian Geographic, March/April 2002, p. 77. Reprinted with permission (reduced from original size).

2001). Wilderness is valued in part for its aesthetic properties, as something to be visually consumed and appreciated (Neumann 1998). The split between nature/culture, wilderness/civilization and consumption/production dictates that the only acceptable role for humans in 'wilderness' is as observer (Neumann 1998). The idea of nature as people-free wilderness is reproduced through ecotourism practices in two ways. First, the image of pristine nature as a people-free landscape (except for a few tourists), a cultural construction that is reproduced by travel brochures and advertisements, fuels the geographical imagination of ecotourists (Mowforth and Munt 1998). Second, American parks, as symbols of human-free wilderness, have served as international models for protected areas that displace and exclude local people (Guha 1989; Spence 1999). These same parks and protected areas are one of the main attractions for ecotourists in all parts of the world (Ceballos-Lascurain 1996; Weaver 1998; Honey 1999). The problem, then, is that ecotourism seeks to engage people in developing countries in the production and defense of a specific, Western view of nature, a view that has previously been used to justify their exclusion from traditionally inhabited land and that often runs counter to their own worldview (Akama 1996).

Akama (1996), in his analysis of tourism in Kenya, identifies the privileging of western environmental values and scientific theories as a source of alienation of local people from the interconnected activities of tourism and conservation. Beginning in the age of colonialism, and continuing into the postcolonial period, the dominance of Western environmental values led to the creation of parks and nature reserves, the exclusion of local people from them, and the promotion of parks as places to be experienced by foreign tourists (Akama 1996). In the past, the benefits of mass tourism to Kenya have accrued almost exclusively to national elites and foreign companies, while rural peasants bore the costs of property damage by protected wildlife and the foregone opportunity of not using protected land for livelihood activities (Akama 1996). Akama recommends a shift away from nature-based tourism, which is essentially mass tourism to view natural landscapes and wildlife, towards small-scale, locally controlled ecotourism that empowers local people to make their own decisions regarding conservation and tourism development, and to decide how costs and benefits will be distributed. While

ecotourism does not necessarily impose foreign conceptions of nature, it does provide an arena for the contestation of different views (Vivanco 2001). Vivanco (2001), in a case study of Monteverde, Costa Rica, proposes that through exposure to ecotourism local people do not necessarily replace previous understandings of nature with new values, nor do they reject western aesthetic and ethical values outright. Instead, local people acquire complex layers of meanings of nature that might exist in tension with one another. The way tourists perceive their surroundings, including human residents, is juxtaposed with local environmental perceptions, reshaping and challenging local interpretations of and interactions with nature (Vivanco 2001). While ecotourism may provide substantial economic benefits, these benefits do not come without a price (Honey 1999; Vivanco 2001). What is of concern is the question of whose knowledge and values count. In theory, ecotourism is respectful of local cultures and customs; in practice, it may contribute to the destruction or modification of the very culture and lifestyles it aims to protect (Honey 1999).

Ecotourism as Science

The western view of nature inherent in ecotourism does not rely on tourists alone for its perpetuation; scientists and environmental organizations also play an important role. The emergence of the new scientific discipline of conservation biology in the 1980s gave parks and protected areas renewed scientific status as places where biological diversity is conserved (Sarkar 2001). The concept of biodiversity, like wilderness and parks, is a socially constructed concept that has assumed a scientific disguise of neutrality, yet works to restrict and define human-environment interactions in specific ways (Escobar 1998). Biodiversity, particularly its 'charismatic megafauna', is one of the main attractions for ecotourists. Traditionally, as discussed above, scientists have advocated the conservation of biodiversity in parks and protected areas that exclude local people from inhabiting the park or using its resources, while permitting (usually rich, foreign) tourists to use the park for recreation. However, in response to the numerous problems with the traditional model of people-free parks, both social and ecological, and under the influence of the rise of sustainable development, there has been a shift in recent years away from this 'fences and fines' approach

to conservation ('environmentalism for nature') towards community-based conservation ('environmentalism for the people'), which recognizes that local people must be involved in and benefit from conservation if its goals are to be achieved (West and Brechin 1991; Adams 1998; Salafsky and Wollenberg 2000; Adams and Hulme 2001). Many conservationists, conservation projects and environmental non-governmental organizations (ENGOS) have appropriated the tools and language of development, such as participatory rural appraisal and community-based development, in order to gain support for conservation initiatives (Adams 1998). This shift has also made large amounts of international funding previously allotted for development work available to conservation groups (Adams 1998). Community-based conservation, in contrast to the traditional model, includes at least some of the following characteristics: "local-level, voluntary, people-centered, participatory, decentralized, village-based management" (Little 1994, 350). Many scientists view ecotourism as the 'shining light' of the community-based conservation movement (Belsky 1999), and argue that conservationists, not private industry, should be responsible for ecotourism development because they better represent the public interest (Weaver 1998, 22).

Salafsky and Wollenberg (2000), in their evaluation of 39 community-based conservation projects, found that ecotourism provided the best incentives for local people to support conservation, in contrast with other activities such as agroforestry. They recognize that tourist enterprises may be more 'complex', but they do not discuss any of the social, economic, or political factors surrounding its implementation. The only concern is for conservation goals, and the solution to problems of complexity is more and better 'external support' (Salafsky and Wollenberg 2000). Moreover, scientists or conservation practitioners manage both conservation and development aspects of these projects. The challenge is to help local practitioners to evaluate and improve their project using scientific principles (Salafsky et al. 2001). Local benefits and impacts are reduced to numerical measurements that are statistically correlated with conservation outcomes and attitudes. When the goal is conservation, ecotourism is a scientific undertaking.

The continued authority of scientists, and privileging of scientific methods and principles, raises serious concerns over

whether ecotourism can actually meet local needs or contribute to a locally defined vision of development. Pretty and Pimbert (1995) offer an insightful critique of 'normal science,' and its inability to serve the needs of local people. "The trouble with normal science is that it gives credibility to opinion only when it is defined in scientific language, which may be inadequate for describing the complex and changing experiences of rural people and other actors in conservation and development" (Pretty and Pimbert 1995, 8). If attempts to integrate conservation and development are to be successful, in ecotourism ventures as well as other activities, there must be a reversal in normal scientific professionalism such that local knowledge, institutions, technologies, and rights to resources are recognized and given precedence over external knowledge and practices (Pretty and Pimbert 1995). The challenge, according to Pretty and Pimbert, is to foster conditions that encourage locally driven participation and self-reliant conservation and development.

Local Involvement

Proponents of ecotourism claim that it involves local people and improves their well-being. However, past research has shown that not all local people will be equally involved in or affected by tourism activities; impacts and involvement may vary by gender, class, or other characteristics (Stronza 2001). There is no reason to expect that ecotourism is any different in this respect. Yet the rhetoric of ecotourism continues to refer to 'local people' and 'local communities' as though they are homogenous entities. This can be partly explained by the predominant influence of conservationists, rather than development practitioners, in local ecotourism projects. While development practitioners and social scientists have learned that communities are heterogeneous and socially complex, conservationists continue to view communities as small spatial units with a homogeneous social structure and shared norms (Agrawal 2000). Although this image of the community is attractive because it is easily contrasted with other actors, such as 'the state' or 'private industry,' there is a need to better understand the multiplicity of actors, interests, institutions and processes present in any given place (Agrawal 2000).

Recognizing that approaches to ecotourism from an environmental perspective fail to adequately consider social complexities, Scheyvens (1999) recommends approaching

ecotourism from a development perspective that considers not just total economic benefits for the community, but also how these benefits are distributed and the social and cultural effects of ecotourism development on local people. In order to assess the effectiveness of ecotourism as a development tool, she recommends using an empowerment framework that incorporates four types of empowerment: psychological, social, political and economic (Scheyvens 1999). In this framework, signs of empowerment would include: long-term economic gain that is evenly distributed throughout the community; increased status for marginalized people; increased community cohesion and social capital; and fair representation of the interests of all community members in an open political process (Scheyvens 1999). In contrast, signs of disempowerment would include: sporadic income that accrues mainly to outsiders or local elites; widespread disillusionment with ecotourism due to restrictions on resource use; social conflict and competition over ecotourism benefits; and autocratic management of ecotourism that does not involve community members in decision making (Scheyvens 1999). Scheyvens' framework is useful for evaluating existing ecotourism projects, particularly those that include local involvement as part of a conservation agenda.

Mowforth and Munt's (1998) discussion of Pretty's typology of participation also illustrates the variety of ways that local involvement can be conceived or implemented. According to Pretty's typology, participation can range from 'manipulative participation,' in which local people are given token responsibilities or jobs but have no real power, to 'self-mobilisation,' in which local people initiate (ecotourism) development and maintain control over resource use and decision making (Mowforth and Munt 1998). In the middle is 'functional participation,' in which local people may share in decision making, but the project is still initiated by an external agency, such as a state institution or non-governmental organization (NGO), and most major decisions are made outside the community. As Mowforth and Munt (1998) acknowledge, the only type of participation that is likely to challenge uneven power relations is that which originates within the local community itself. Participation and empowerment are thus two ways in which local involvement in ecotourism ventures is conceived.

An example of ecotourism development from Belize, the second most popular ecotourist destination in Central America after Costa Rica (Weaver 1998), will be presented to illustrate how the theoretical ideal of local involvement is translated into practice in a conservation-driven ecotourism project. Belsky (1999), in her case study of Gales Point Manatee, reveals the complicated political and social processes that underpin local involvement in ecotourism development. The Gales Point Manatee ecotourism project was started in 1992 by a group of Americans, led by a wildlife biologist. There was no social scientist included in the consultative group that conceived the project, nor was any attempt made to understand the historical social and political context of the area (Belsky 1999). Although ecotourism was promoted as a development tool to raise local income, the emphasis was on providing incentives to support conservation goals, which were centered on the conservation of two endangered species, the manatee and the hawksbill sea turtle (Belsky 1999). The ecotourism project was initially proposed as part of a larger proposal that aimed to establish a biosphere reserve, a protected area that permits some 'sustainable' development activities along its perimeter (Belsky 1999). This is essentially a community-based conservation project, with development included as a means to achieve conservation objectives, not as an end in itself. A survey conducted in 1994 found that ecotourism provided a primary or secondary source of income for only 28% of the 77 permanent households in the community; for 72% of households, hunting and selling bush meat, wage labour, remittances from abroad, or selling fish and agricultural products were the most important sources of income (Belsky 1999). Not only was ecotourism income not evenly distributed throughout the community, it was concentrated among the richer households. Only those residents with access to capital could afford the entry cost of boats or accommodation amenities such as plumbing and electricity; for the poorest members of the community, participating in ecotourism is not really an option (Belsky 1999). By the late 1990s, ecotourism in the community was contributing to intense social conflict and economic hardship. Problems included: conflict between those who benefited from ecotourism and those who did not, culminating in the arson of a newly constructed craft center; conflict between those who supported wildlife conservation for

its links to ecotourism and those whose livelihood still depended on fishing and hunting; declining numbers of visitors, resulting in loss of income and difficulty repaying loans; and loss of political and financial support for the project following a change in national government (Belsky 1999). Interestingly, local residents often expressed their dissatisfaction by resisting the ecotourist/scientific vision of nature and conservation. Acts of resistance included refusal to remove garbage from tourist areas and purposeful hunting and fishing in protected areas (Belsky 1999).

Clearly, although this example of ecotourism development technically incorporated 'local involvement', it failed to meet Scheyvens' (1999) criteria of psychological, social, political and economic empowerment. Local participation in this project was not manipulated per se, but it was far from self-mobilizing. Foreign scientists defined the project goals, strategies, institutions and operating procedures, while richer local residents received all of the benefits; ecotourism in this case did not reform traditional patterns of power. Cynically, it would appear that local participation was used as a token input to legitimate foreign conservation agendas. Even if project planners viewed local involvement as more than a token input, they did not take any steps to understand the local context for this involvement, or to build a project structure that might enable or support more empowering activities. While this is a case study, specific to a particular context, it is important to note that the ambiguity of 'local involvement' promoted in discourses of ecotourism is partly to blame. The assumption that local involvement is something that can be decided by project planners fails to consider that local people will make their own decisions to participate, or not, based on their economic circumstances, personal beliefs, and political and social position and connections. Given the ambiguity and assumptions underlying 'local involvement' and 'participation' in definitions of ecotourism, and a preoccupation with conservation rather than development goals, it is not surprising that there are problems translating the idea of ecotourism into practice. Overall, "conservationists have been naïve in assuming that a commitment on paper to sustainability and participation or 'bottom-up' planning would yield successful projects" (Adams 1998, 307).

Conclusion

Ecotourism is many things to many people. For poor villagers in Gales Point Manatee, Belize, it is a source of economic disparity and social conflict; for program officers at UNEP, it is a panacea for problems of both international conservation and local development. The positioning of ecotourism at the intersection of conservation and development, in multiple discourses, means that it has the potential to be both of these things, or anything in between. However, if the promises of ecotourism are to be realized in practice then the problematic underlying concepts of nature, scientific conservation, and local involvement must be unpacked. Ecotourism provides an important opportunity to challenge traditional approaches to conservation and development, but only if evaluation moves beyond an assessment of impacts to consider who has the power to define what it is, how it functions, and who benefits, in particular contexts.

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