Ecotourism: it's good for your health

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Abstract

The parameters of ecotourism require inclusion of local communities in the development and operation of ventures. This requirement resonates with the literature on health improvement, which shows that enabling individuals and communities to increase control over their lives – and the change in power relationships that is entailed – is health enhancing. An implication of this approach is that the successful development of ecotourism ventures will need to replicate the approach set out in the WHO's Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion: ensuring a supportive policy environment; community action in developing activities; creating supportive, sustainable environments for tourist activity; increasing the personal knowledge and skills of those involved; and reorienting resources from the 'curative' end of the environmental perspective (i.e. fixing the damage done) to the preventive (not doing the damage in the first place). This approach has been successful in improving health, and it is therefore posited that the approach would lead to sustainable ecotourism development.

This paper explores the relationship between ecotourism development and health. It then outlines current moves on the West Coast of New Zealand's Southern Alps to strengthen and develop ecotourism, including the provision of education and training, as the first step towards creating a Centre for Sustainable Development.

Keywords: ecotourism, health improvement, sustainable development, New Zealand.

1 Ecotourism

In the past thirty years, world tourism flows have trebled, and international tourist arrivals now total around 700 million annually (WTO [1]). The impact on popular destinations has caused some to re-evaluate the benefits. For example,

Majorca, whose tourist numbers grew from around 400,000 in 1960 to around 10 million by the turn of the century, introduced in 2002 an 'eco-tax' to pay for improvements to the infrastructure, and repair some of the damage caused.

The term 'ecotourism' was coined by Hector Ceballos-Lascaurain at a conference in Mexico City in July 1983:

> "Ecotourism…involves travelling to relatively undisturbed natural areas with the specific object of studying, admiring and enjoying the scenery and its wild plants and animals, as well as any existing cultural aspects….Ecotourism implies a scientific, aesthetic or philosophical approach…..the person who practices ecotourism has the opportunity of immersing him or herself in nature in a way that most people cannot enjoy in their routine, urban existences…..(and) that will convert him into somebody keenly involved in conservation issues." (Mader [2]).

The concept is growing and developing, and ecotourism is now being promoted as a sustainable alternative to mass tourism. Although there is some contest over detail, its components are generally held to include interaction with relatively unmodified physical environments; conservation; and environmental interpretation and/or education (see, e.g, the definition offered by the Ecotourism Association of Australia [3]).

An extended articulation of the definition of ecotourism was adopted by the 2002 World Ecotourism Summit. It distinguishes ecotourism from sustainable tourism by the addition of specific principles in relation to

> "conservation of the natural and cultural heritage, inclusion of local and indigenous communities in the planning, development and operation of ventures, thus contributing to their well-being; interpretation of the natural and cultural heritage of the destination to visitors; and preferring independent travellers and small groups." (World Ecotourism Summit [4]).

It is not enough that tourist operators develop ecotourism ventures that conform to these principles; multi-sectoral approaches are required – including the various levels of government – in order that developments occur as part of balanced strategies (SDE Web-Conference [5]).

In summary, then, ecotourism is currently held to sit within four parameters:

- it involves interaction with the natural environment
- it has an educational component (i.e. is designed to increase understanding of the environment and how it works)
- it is done with a light ecological footprint
- it is managed by businesses that are developed and run by local communities

Each of the parameters creates tension. First, there is a continuum of views on the degree to which people are regarded as part of – or threats to - the environment. On one hand, we share the planet with its waterways, flora and fauna; it is important to our mental and spiritual health that we do so; but there is an issue about the extent to which we exploit those interactions. On the other, the ecology of (certainly some of) our physical environment is so fragile that it needs a degree of protection that can only be offered by completely excluding humans.

Secondly, there is debate about the extent to which the educational component should be specifically designed to change the behaviour of people. Some say this should always be an explicit aim of ecotourism ventures; others say that telling the stories of an environment and how it operates is enough. Some believe that there is a particular class of tourist – ecotourist – made up of people who have values and beliefs about where tourists should go and how they should behave (see, e.g., Duffy [6]); others, that the legitimacy of the term 'ecotourism' resides in the experience itself, and not in who is having the experience (MacKenzie [7]).

Thirdly, there is the debate about what constitutes a light footprint – and how 'light' is enough.   Some argue that almost any intercontinental tourism is unlikely to qualify because of the amount of energy expended in getting to the destination; others believe that ameliorating the energy expended by increasing the length of visitor stay is acceptable. (The Friends of Nature Quality Criteria for Ecological Travel [8], for example, include the suggestion that air travel should be made only for distances of more than 800 kilometres involving stays of more than 12 days). This 'light footprint' debate is often the place where general discussions about ecotourism start and stop; and where those discussions get confused with the broader discourse on the 'greening' of business

Finally, there is a divergence of views between those who accept (ethically-run) large companies owning and operating ecotourism businesses as long as the employment is generated locally, and those who say that the businesses must be owned and operated locally. This is a key debate, because it is here that we intersect with the discussions on the determinants of health.

2   Health and its determinants

There is wide recognition that health cannot be defined in terms of its relationship to states of disease or illness: witness, for example, the World Health Organisation's 1946 definition of health as "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity" (WHO [9]). Health, in this construct, is seen as a basic human right (WHO [10]) that is a resource for living, not an end in itself (WHO [11]). Prerequisites for health include peace, shelter, education, social security, social relations, food, income, the empowerment of women, a stable eco-system, sustainable resource use, social justice, respect for human rights, and equity (WHO [10]).

Once the pre-requisites for health are in place, health status is determined by a number of factors, including age, sex and heredity; social and community influences; living and working conditions; individual lifestyle; gender and culture; and socio-economic and environmental conditions. Many of the most powerful factors act primarily at the level of whole communities and population groups, rather than individuals (MoH [12]). For example, in Britain, death rates at all ages are two to three times higher among disadvantaged social groups than the more affluent groups (Benzeval and Judge [13]; DoH [14]). In New Zealand, while life expectancy has improved dramatically for the majority ethnic group over the past 20 years, for Mäori and Pacific ethnic groups it has remained

static (Ajwani et al. [15]). Recent estimates are that 23% of years of life lost because of mortality prior to age 75 in Canada can be attributed to income differences (Raphael [16]).

The evidence, then, is clear enough to support the view that there is a causal link between low socio-economic status and poor health, even if there is contest about the mechanism(s) through which causation occurs. Where the differences between high and low incomes are small, infant mortality rates are lower - and life expectancy at age one is higher - than countries where there are large differences in income levels (Wilkinson [17]; Putnam et al. [18]; Kawachi et al. [19]; Raphael [16]). There is a strong argument that key factors are (a) the degree of income inequality within communities, and (b) the degree to which, inter alia, community members feel included in decision-making processes and trust both the people around them and the institutions that serve them.

As the Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion notes:

"Health is created by caring for oneself and others, by being able to take decisions and have control over one's life circumstances, and by ensuring that the society one lives in creates conditions that allow the attainment of health by all its members" (WHO [11]).

The focus on the importance of personal control and social contribution supports Wilkinson and Marmot [20] when they argue that the income inequalities are important because they reflect social inequality and the existence of social hierarchies; and that the power differentials that hierarchies represent impact adversely on health status.

In my view, this construction of the concept of health is in harmony with the understandings of health shared by many indigenous peoples - understandings that articulate a complex of factors similar to those outlined by New Zealand Maori, who see good health as being dependent on a balance of factors that affect well-being:

Te taha wairua: spiritual health, including the practice of tikanga Maori (Maori customs and culture) in general

Te taha hinengaro: the emotional and psychological well-being of the whanau (extended family) and of each individual within it

Te taha tinana: the physical aspects of health.

Te taha whanau: the social environment in which individuals live – the whanau of family, the communities in which whanau live and act.

Te ao turoa: the environment: the relationship between Maori and te ao turoa is one of tiakitanga (stewardship). It is the continuous flow of life source. Without the natural environment, the people cease to exist as Maori. (MoH [21])

The notion of environmental stewardship contributing to well-being has current resonance, not only in its echoing of the 19th century focus on curbing the transmission of highly communicable diseases, but in the late 20th century concerns with ability of the natural environment to sustain the current rate of resource depletion. "A new public health has emerged in which healthy environments that include a healthy social and economic milieu are seen as the way forward to improve population health" (Taylor and Guest [22]). Labonté

has argued that the public health paradigm has changed. Whereas the imperatives were once to protect people from the ravages of the environment (with the consequences of failure being that people died, sometimes in huge numbers), the imperative now is to protect the environment from the ravages of people (with the consequence of failure being that the planet dies) (Labonté [23]).

3   Ecotourism as health improvement

There is no current evidence on which to base an absolute assertion that development of ecotourism will lead to improved health within the communities in which it takes place. However, ecotourism developments, as defined, are developed and operated by and with the communities in which the developments are based, and what we already know about the impact on health of changing power structures – of increasing the extent to which individuals and communities feel in control of their lives – supports the view that the development of ecotourism has the potential to increase this sense of control.

Ottawa Charter s	Applied to Ecotourism
Build healthy public policy Health promotion goes beyond health care. It puts health on the agenda of policy makers in all sectors and at all levels, directing them to be aware of the health consequences of their decisions and to accept their responsibilities for health.	A supportive policy environment at all levels of government, so that policies encourage processes that support the development of ecotourism opportunities, and that explicitly do not support activities that would threaten the viability of ecotourism ventures
Health promotion policy combines diverse but complementary approaches including legislation, fiscal measures, taxation and organisational change. It is co-ordinated action that leads to health, income and social policies that foster greater equity. Joint action contributes to ensuring safer and healthier goods and services, healthier public services, and cleaner, more enjoyable environments.	For example, the policy environment could • require an assessment of the economic, social and environmental impact of a venture • offer financial incentives to local businesses starting up • encourage the 'greening' of businesses and so on
Create supportive environments. Our societies are complex and interrelated. Health cannot be separated from other goals. The inextricable links between people and their environment constitutes the basis for a socio-ecological approach to health. The overall guiding principle for the world nations, regions and communities alike, is the need to encourage reciprocal maintenance - to take care of each other, our communities and our natural environment. The conservation of natural resources throughout the world should be emphasised as a global responsibility…...	There is, arguably, an exact fit here: a supportive environment for ecotourism development would equal that for health promotion.

Strengthen community action Health promotion works through concrete and effective community action in setting priorities, making decisions, planning strategies and implementing them to achieve better health. At the heart of this process is the empowerment of communities, their ownership and control of their own endeavours and destinies.	The development of community-owned local enterprises, including tourist ventures, is at the heart of a community's ability to improve its well-being. The educative component in ecotourism also allows the local ventures to reach people in other communities, because visitors take their learning with them.
Develop personal skills Health promotion supports personal and social development through providing information, education for health and enhancing life skills. By so doing, it increases the options available to people to exercise more control over their own health and over their environments, and to make choices conducive to health. .	Enabling people to gain the skills to run ecotourism ventures in their community gives them more control over their destiny, thereby increasing their options.
Reorient health services The responsibility for health promotion in health services is shared among individuals, community groups, health professionals, health service institutions and governments. They must work together towards a health care system which contributes to the pursuit of health. The role of the health sector must move increasingly in a health promotion direction, beyond its responsibility for providing clinical and curative services	Reorientation of resources from the 'curative' end of the environmental perspective (i.e. fixing the damage done) to the preventive (not doing the damage in the first place) is a key theme in ecotourism ventures. Arguably, all businesses – including mainstream tourist ventures – will need to move in this direction.

This principle of local ownership and shared power is in complete accordance with the Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion, which argues that health improvement requires action and support in five domains.

There is every reason to expect, then, that developing ecotourism has the potential to improve the levels of well-being within local communities, and that this might well translate into lower levels of premature morbidity and mortality

4 Developing ecotourism on the West Coast of the Southern Alps

The West Coast has 8% of New Zealand's land mass and 1% of its population. 87% of its land mass is conservation estate (compared to 40% for the rest of New Zealand). Physically isolated by an alpine fault, it stretches a distance of some 550 kilometres.

The West Coast economy has historically been based on the utilisation of the region's natural resources, notably gold, timber and coal. Early in the 20th century, farming came to prominence in the regional economy. Tourism - long

established at the region's two glaciers, but now developing rapidly elsewhere - has recently begun to rival agriculture in economic importance.   In 1990-91 tourist expenditure on the West Coast was in the order of $117m, and this has since grown to almost $130m (WCRC [24]).

The combination of a small (circa 30,000) and dispersed population, together with a high proportion of elderly and others reliant on income support, means that a high standard of health and social services are essential, but difficult and expensive to deliver (WCRC [24]).   In 1996, GDP per capita was 5% below the national average, but by 2000 this had slipped to 12% below.   Seven of the 31 census areas were in the most deprived 20% in New Zealand. The West Coast as a whole has the lowest median household and per capita income in New Zealand, and a higher rate of benefit (income support) usage, for a longer duration. Educational   attainment   levels   are   amongst   the   lowest   in   New Zealand (WCDHB [25]).

The region's Economic Development Strategic Plan includes an aspiration to be recognised as a centre of excellence for ecotourism, and specific targets relating to the increase of visitor numbers for 'eco-experiences' (WCRC [26]). This will require coherence in the planning and resource-use policies of the four local authorities and the Department of Conservation. Growing this coherence will require the support of public sector leaders, both politicians and officers.

Tai Poutini Polytechnic - the region's main tertiary education provider – has committed to establishing a national centre of excellence for ecotourism. The Centre for Ecotourism is likely to have four related arms:

1. *A research and development centre* that would develop and implement methodology to:
    - research opportunities for ecotourism ventures
    - develop the business case(s), in conjunction with local communities
    - support the business development during the first 2-5 years.
    - assist existing ecotourism operators to improve their businesses
    - assess and monitor the links between ecotourism development and population health; and the impact of ecotourism development on the local and regional infrastructure
    - develop and disseminate methods for sustainable management of visitors.
2. *An education centre* that would
    - initially provide vocational education and skills training, both in ecotourism and in business management
    - develop as a centre of educational excellence in ecotourism – and its impact on health improvement and infrastructure - and, by linking with appropriate University partners, have the capacity to offer under-graduate and post-graduate education programmes.
3. *A marketing centre* that would:
    - develop expertise in marketing ecotourism
    - offer assistance to ecotourism businesses - whether developed by the R&D centre or not - in the ongoing marketing of their ventures

4. *An accreditation centre* that could contribute to the development of accreditation for New Zealand ecotourism operations that meet agreed standards

A number of significant steps have been taken:
- in 2003, a Certificate in Ecotourism programme was offered; a Diploma has been added this year.
- We have an agreement with Lincoln University to work with us on the development of ecotourism, and on a broader education and training agenda around issues of sustainable development
- funding has been made available by the Polytechnic Regional Development Fund to support the initial stages of establishing of the Centre, as well as building capacity within both Polytechnic staff and operators.

5   Conclusion

The development of ecotourism ventures on the West Coast of the Southern Alps in New Zealand has the potential to act as a force for the development of local communities in an area of the country that is sparsely populated and ranks highly on indices of deprivation. Done well, the communities will experience a greater degree of control over their affairs. The perceptions of increase in power that result could well lead to an improvement in well-being, measured at both the community and individual levels.

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