

Chapter 9

Ecotourism in Asia: How Strong Branding Creates Opportunity for Local Economies and the Environment

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ABSTRACT

Noting the significant impact that tourism has on ecosystems and their local communities, ecotourism has emerged as an alternative that seeks to find a “win-win” strategy for all parties involved. With growing tourism throughout Asia and active development of many ecosystems, ecotourism has the promise to mend the social and economic gap while also ensuring a positive ecological impact over time. This chapter seeks to understand how sustainability and conservation fit into the core values of the ecotourism industry, as well as, how the industry plans for the short-term and long-term effects of their actions. Two important relationships are then explored in-depth because of their significance to the current and future state of ecotourism in Asia. Working with mass media, a strong brand may be created, thus increasing tourism to a destination site and ensuring that it is sustained over time. And through key partnerships, like those of local communities, ecotourism may have the potential to mutually benefit the people and the places tourists come to visit.

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INTRODUCTION

Similar to the study of mass media, the study of tourism has revealed a varying degree of effects over the years. From significant influences on social and economic well-being to moderate changes in culture, the global travelling phenomenon and its impacts have been difficult to assess (Chen, 2014; Filiposki et al., 2016). The negative environmental and ecological impacts of tourism, however, have long been noted in academic research and industry case-studies (Buckley, 2012). In densely populated regions of the world like Asia, active land development for human habitation and industries like tourism can have drastic effects not only on the non-living environment, but also on the many species that call it their home (Hitchcock, 2009; Holden, 2007). Unforeseen consequences of development have been: the extinction of species, the degradation of natural resources/cultural landmarks, the commodification of culture, and significant shifts in the socioeconomic power structure of the region (Holden, 2007). With the potential to bring in billions of dollars' worth of revenue, the tourism industry has been an attractive venture for many Asian nations (Winter et al., 2002). However, noting the negative aspects alongside those that benefit their economy and global standing, many Asian nations, as with other developing nations throughout the world, have sought out an alternative that may provide the ecosystem and its people with mutually-beneficial outcomes (Chon, 2013; Fennell, 2014). In recent years, this increased attention to tourism throughout Asia has led to the emergence of sustainable forms of tourism with a "green" objective—to help preserve the ecosystem that also serves as the destination for tourists from around the world (Chon, 2013). Broadly known as "ecotourism", these many forms have flourished, though only few have prospered (Fennell, 2014). And with a focus on how ecosystems, nations, and local communities can be sustained by effective ecotourism, this chapter seeks to analyze past failures, find a new definition for this industry, and outline the ways in which effective branding not only helps the bottom-line of the tourism industry, but also conservation efforts for some of Asia's most beautiful sites.

Ecotourism at-a-Glance

In the late 1980's, the tourism industry first encountered the term "ecotourism" as an exciting new prospect for its future (Clifton & Benson, 2006). With increased environmental interests growing in the West, and a shift in trends from consumer culture to lifestyle, ecotourism emerged as a reaction towards traditional forms of tourism that many viewed as exploitative of both the environment and its local people (Dorsey et al., 2004; Mowforth & Munt, 2015). Ecotourism, however, was not well-defined. The inability to agree on a fixed definition meant that ecotourism

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