The Role of Interpretation in Ecotourism Development

Wiendu Nuryanti, Ph.D.
The Indonesia Institute of the Arts

Abstract
Ecotourism possesses unique market opportunities as a tool not only for nature conservation, but also for protection and promotion of cultural heritage and traditions, poverty alleviation, and sustained economic growth. Proper application of ecotourism principles to tourism business, therefore, can be a “win-win” situation, benefiting the local economy and the natural environment, while at the same time respecting and valuing the local communities’ culture and traditions. The scope of interpretation in ecotourism as in other cultural tourism segments is complex and broad. It is also essential to visitor satisfaction, as numerous surveys have shown since interaction with local people is a vital part of the attraction of ecotourism for visitors. The main issues involved in interpreting in ecotourism include:
1. Values Reconstruction
2. Cross Cultural Understanding
3. Professionalism
4. Education and Training
5. Media.
Agents and Techniques Interpretation is not only a description of physical facts and tangible elements: it moves into the realms of spiritual truth, emotional response, and deeper meaning and understanding. Meaning lies in the observer or participant (i.e. the eco-tourist) rather than as some objective quality inherent in the environment itself. To be successful, interpreters require a range of methods, media, materials and management, with each of these having a complex range of technical aspects. In developing countries, where availability of information, infrastructure, education and training are limited, the contribution of interpreters in the delivery of ecotourism is vital but often poorly developed.

Keywords: Interpretation issues, Interpretation in ecotourism
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Background

Ecotourism, which is defined as “responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people” (WTO, 2004), possesses unique market opportunities as a tool not only for nature conservation, but also for protection and promotion of cultural heritage and traditions, poverty alleviation, and sustained economic growth.

Proper application of the principles and practices of ecotourism can transform the tourism industry and allow travelers to have positive impacts on host communities and on the environment.

Through analyses of major trends in the development of ecotourism – strong performance, increasing consumer demand for responsible travel options, increasing need for community-based ecotourism as a tool for poverty alleviation, Travelers’ Philanthropy movements, and the growth of ‘green’ certification programs – it can be seen that ecotourism can have significant implications for tourism growth in Indonesia and other Southeast Asian destinations.

The tourism industry is one of the world’s largest industries. If tourism were a country, it would have the second largest economy, surpassed only by the United States. In 2004, tourism contributed an estimated $5.49 trillion of economic activities and 215 million jobs, which accounted for 8.1% of total employment worldwide. Tourism is also one of the fastest growing sectors of the world economy. In 1950, global tourist arrivals were 25 million. By 2004, the number had increased to over 760 million.

The potentials for the growth of the tourism industry are especially important for developing countries. In over 150 countries, tourism is one of the top five foreign exchange earners, and in 60 countries it is the number one export. More than 83% of developing countries rely

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1 The International Ecotourism Society, Ecotourism Fact Sheet, 2005
on tourism as a principle foreign exchange earner. For the world’s 40 poorest countries, tourism is second most important source of foreign exchange after oil, and is often the only sector of international trade where they can produce a surplus.

The tourism industry has been particularly strong in Asia. With the rapid economic development in many of the countries in the region, the number of tourists traveling within Asia has been steadily increasing. Many countries in Asia have emerged as major tourist destinations for European and Northern American tourists who seek unique cultural experiences. With rich and diverse historical, cultural and ecological offerings, the countries in Asia possess unique market opportunities for ecotourism.

Within the tourism industry, ecotourism, along with nature-based, cultural, heritage and soft adventure tourism, is part of what is called “experiential tourism” that is growing most rapidly, and the growth is expected to continue. While the tourism industry as a whole globally grew at about 9% a year on average in the 1990s, the annual growth rate of the ecotourism sector was estimated to be 20-30%.

The United Nations’ declaration of the year 2002 as the International Year of Ecotourism demonstrated that this concept has taken on global importance. Today, an increasing number of countries have national policies for tourism development that incorporate the concept of ecotourism.

The three most important tenets of ecotourism are

(1) **Conservation:** Ecotourism provides tangible benefits for conservation and protection of the environment;

(2) **Community:** Ecotourism respects and values local cultures and provides tangible benefits to the host communities through hiring and buying locally, providing job training, paying fair wages, celebrating local cultures and protecting indigenous rights; and

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7 The International Ecotourism Society, Ecotourism Statistical Fact Sheet, 2000
(3) Education: Ecotourism is educational as well enjoyable for the traveler. Through environmentally and socially responsible practices, tourists learn more about the places they are visiting.

Proper application of ecotourism principles to tourism business, therefore, can be a “win-win” situation, benefiting the local economy and the natural environment, while at the same time respecting and valuing the local communities’ culture and traditions. Tourist destinations in developing countries, therefore, can benefit greatly from community-based, low-impact ecotourism, which provides tools for poverty alleviation, creation of sustainable livelihoods, conservation, and protection and promotion of cultural heritage sites, traditions and local foods.

Ecotourism first grew out of the new global environmental movement in the late 1970s. By the early 1990s, it had become the fastest growing sector of the tourism industry. In recent years, it has helped to spawn a variety of new terms, such as sustainable tourism, pro-poor tourism, geo-tourism, and responsible tourism, all of which encompass the concept that tourism can and should benefit conservation and host communities.

Since the 1990s, ecotourism and nature tourism markets have outperformed sun and sand tourism, and according to the statistics recently released from the World Tourism Organization (WTO), ecotourism and nature tourism is growing three times faster than the tourism industry as a whole. This shows that, as Mexican architect and ecotourism expert Hector Ceballos-Lascurain says, ecotourism is “no longer the subject of wishful thinking,” but has become “a powerful global reality.”

In addition, evidence indicates that ecotourists tend to spend more money while on vacation. A study by a business institute in Costa Rica comparing tourists in France and Costa Rica shows an interesting contrast between ecotourists and “sun and sand” tourists.

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8 World Tourism Organization, Press release, June 2004
9 TIES, Eco Currents, Second Quarter 2005, p5
Costa Rica, one of the world’s most famous ecotourism destinations, receives only about one million visitors per year, which is less than 1/70 of the tourists France receives. However, the average visitor in Costa Rica generates US$1000, which is 1.5 times higher than the average revenues generated from tourists in France. One of the reasons for greater spending by ecotourists is that they tend to stay longer in a destination.

The following graph taken from Weaver (2002), indicates the wide range of activities and visitor attitudes that are typically grouped under the umbrella label of “ecotourism”.

**Figure 1:** Characteristics of hard and soft ecotourism as ideal types

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>HARD</th>
<th>SOFT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Active, Deep)</td>
<td>(Passive, Shallow)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong Environment Commitment</td>
<td>Moderate Environment Commitment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enhancement sustainability</td>
<td>Steady state sustainability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specialized trips</td>
<td>Multi-purpose trips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long trips</td>
<td>Short trips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small groups</td>
<td>Larger groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physically active</td>
<td>Physically passive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical challenge</td>
<td>Physical Comfort</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Few if any services expected</td>
<td>Services expected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emphasis on personal experience</td>
<td>Emphasis on interpretation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make own travel arrangements</td>
<td>More use of travel agents and tour operators</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Weaver, 2002)

**Interpretation Issues in Eco-Tourism**

The scope of interpretation in ecotourism as in other cultural tourism segments is complex and broad. It is also essential to visitor satisfaction, as numerous surveys have shown since interaction with local people is a vital part of the attraction of ecotourism for visitors (Markwell and Weiler, 1998).

The main issues involved in interpreting in ecotourism include:
1. Values Reconstruction
2. Cross Cultural Understanding

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3. Professionalism  
4. Education and Training  
5. Media, Agents and Techniques

Therefore, a good understanding of what is the essence of interpretation beyond the superficial is important. Tilden (1977) explained that interpretation should involve much more than the exchange of information and should inspire, or even provoke. According to Tilden (1977:9), there are six fundamental principles of interpretation:

1. Any interpretation that does not somehow relate what is being displayed or described to something within the personality or experience of the visitor will be sterile.
2. Information, as such, is not interpretation. Interpretation is revelation based upon information but they are entirely different things. However, all interpretations include information.
3. Interpretation is an art, which combines many arts, whether the materials presented are scientific, historical or environmental.
4. The chief aim of interpretation is not instruction, but provocation.
5. Interpretation should aim to present a whole rather than a part, and must address itself to the whole person rather than any phase.
6. Interpretation addressed to different visitor segments should follow a fundamentally different approach.

These guidelines demonstrate the complexities of interpreting ecotourism attractions whether the landscape, people, traditions, ecology and so forth. It involves more than education, information and signage. Interpretation is not only a description of physical facts and tangible elements: it moves into the realms of spiritual truth, emotional response, and deeper meaning and understanding. Meaning lies in the observer or participant (i.e. the eco-tourist) rather than as some objective quality inherent in the environment itself.

Ecotourism requires more than preservation of the environment: its significance should be conveyed to the visitor, leading to an enriched understanding in the context of the present. Creativity, accordingly, must play a very important role in successful interpretation. Creative interpreters of ecotourism encourage visitors to create their own
mental space by understanding the context and history of the land, people, environment and culture in which they are traveling.

Herbert (1989) states that interpretation can create valuable outcomes both for the interpreters and visitors. For visitors, these outcomes include: greater appreciation, awareness, understanding, self-fulfillment, and enjoyment. For those responsible for interpretation, the positive results include many of those outcomes enjoyed by visitors as well as increases in patronage and improvements in visitor flow. Therefore, interpretation should be seen as an integral part of marketing, managing and planning heritage tourism (Herbert 1989).

To be successful, interpreters require a range of methods, media, materials and management, with each of these having a complex range of technical aspects. In developing countries, where availability of information, infrastructure, education and training are limited, the contribution of interpreters in the delivery of ecotourism is vital but often poorly developed (Butler, 2001).

**Conclusion**

Despite the combination of challenges that the tourism industry has faced in the last several years, the prospects for ecotourism are bright because:

- Consumer demand has remained strong and is growing;
- The efforts to promote sustainable tourism and to ‘green’ more mainstream sectors of the tourism industry have been strong and growing;
- Ecotourism is not only seen as a tool for conservation, but also for poverty reduction. Growing numbers of aid and development agencies, as well as local communities, have recognized the potential of ecotourism as effective development strategy;
- There have been efforts around the world to promote green certification programs that set clear standards and criteria for ecotourism and sustainable tourism.

However, interpretation remains a key issue in implementing ecotourism policies and programs that are sustainable over the long term because good interpretation helps ensure visitor satisfaction.
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