Ecotourism in Asia: moving forward

Asia is now facing changes in global tourism trends, especially in the domains of demography (people), economy (place), culture (desire), and environment (resources). The significant increase in the retired and aging population is influencing holiday trends. That group demands holiday experiences in remote, natural, exotic environments, popularly known as "nostalgic" holidays. The urban middle class with the desire to travel in Asia is growing rapidly, particularly in Russia, India, and PR China, and they seek holiday experiences involving culture and nature. This has accelerated environmental changes in all tourism destinations in Asia, especially with respect to ecotourism destinations.

Ecotourism, by its definition, involves both cultural and natural tourism and due to its expected advantages many countries in Asia have employed ecotourism as a means for sustainable socioeconomic development in rural regions occupying the largest land area. Along the way, there have been challenges in pursuing sustainable ecotourism development, and many questions remain unanswered.

Ecotourism: a marketing ploy?
To show that they are "superior" nature lovers, Asians have long traveled to natural areas under the guise of what the travel agencies label "ecotourism." This behavior became more popular when green marketing strategies were used by the tourism business sector to promote "ecology" and "nature-loving behavior" as a newly branded tourism product. Actually, however, this is a time-honored activity. The UN Food and Agriculture Organization has recently reported that ecotourism is one of the fastest-growing segments of tourism worldwide, at a pace of more than 20% per year, or two- to three-fold faster than the overall tourism industry. The benefits of ecotourism to local businesses are considerably greater than those of mass tourism, providing an incentive to local communities to care for their environment.

There is a significant difference between ecotourism and nature-based tourism, although this escapes most tourists. Visiting natural destinations is nature-based tourism, while learning and participating in environmentally friendly activities owned and operated by locals in a natural setting that is carefully managed by all stakeholders is ecotourism. Therefore, the ecotourism concept includes participation of all, careful site management, small scale, environmentally friendly activity, and learning among visitors and the visited based on the capacity of the hosts, not the guests. The paradigm of ecotourism management differs greatly from that of mainstream tourism. Simply put, mainstream tourism is driven by tourist demand and therefore demand based, but ecotourism is supply based.

Thorny or rosy path to sustainable ecotourism in Asia: how to go forward
"Knowing how" and "how to" are always problematic after determining the "why." It is the same in ecotourism management. It is a common belief that ecotourism is a panacea to mitigate negative tourism impacts. However, a number of ecotourism destinations in Asia encountered numerous challenges as they did not have sufficient knowledge, a functional model, and proper planning to develop and manage ecotourism to promote the well-being of both local people and the environment. As a result, some have even had negative impacts. Learning from past failures and successes in Asia, the following steps can contribute to sustainable ecotourism development.

Step 1: To start employing ecotourism as a tool for local development, people empowerment should first be undertaken by creating a community learning environment, constructing community networks, and strengthening collaborative efforts among local stakeholders. Self-reliant communities must be developed at the very beginning of the project.

Step 2: The decision-making process should be the responsibility of the local people as it gives them the autonomy to shape the community as they see fit. Hence, the role of the tourism developer should be "igniting," not "initiating."

Step 3: Ecotourism committees should be formed, made functional, and accepted by people in the community so that their needs are served. Additionally, the background and status of committee members should be similar to avoid power domination. If the members come from different backgrounds, benefit sharing must be well managed, fair, and transparent.

Step 4: Build collaborative networks because success in ecotourism development requires knowledge from both internal and external stakeholders. Transfer and exchange of tourism knowledge among stakeholders are necessary for successful ecotourism development.

Step 5: The community must conduct ecotourism product analysis, survey needs and wants of locals as well as potential visitors, and carefully select tourism products with little/no negative impact. It is not necessary to sell ecoproducts to attract visitors who are willing to learn about community life.

Step 6: Destination benchmarking helps with the positioning of ecodestinations so that they do not compete with other nearby sites, but instead link them along a travel route.

Step 7: Ecotourism products, market positioning, and branding should be designed in accordance with community strengths, identity, and selective target markets.

Step 8: A strategic ecotourism development plan needs to be drafted, employing a participatory ap-

proach. The strategic plan should be for five years, while each year is directed by an action plan. Both plans create a balance between hosts and guests.

Step 9: The strategic ecotourism development plan and yearly action plan must be implemented with the agreement of stakeholders to create a sense of ownership.

Step 10: Follow-up, monitoring, and evaluation are necessary to ensure that plans are on the right track, fit the changing situation, and result in the best outcomes. If the plans go awry, they need to be immediately amended by the committee.

Productivity improvement via ecotourism cannot be achieved overnight. It requires time and patience. However, if the guidelines above are followed, results will be seen within a reasonable time. Keep in mind that Rome was not built in a day, and sustainable ecotourism sites cannot be either.

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