

## Is Ecotourism Just Another Story of Paradise Lost? エコツーリズムは失樂園の物語でしかないのか？

Brian J. English

イングリッシュ・ブライアン

**Abstract:** This paper uses Milton's epic *Paradise Lost* as a metaphor to highlight the pitfalls of the label "ecotourism". Critics of ecotourism view the label as a misnomer and an advertising ploy. Therefore, in order to provide a balanced perspective of ecotourism, this paper will review the definition of ecotourism, discuss the challenges of implementing successful ecotourism projects and provide some examples of ecotourism-gone-wrong. Since seeking economic benefits of increased tourism is contradictory to protecting natural resources, ecotourism-gone-wrong can ruin a community's resources and leave a natural paradise lost to future generations. For ecotourism destinations that advertise their closeness with nature, restraint and responsible planning are essential to achieve sustainable tourism.

**Keywords:** ecotourism, sustainable tourism, responsible tourism, *Paradise Lost*, ecotourism-gone-wrong

**要旨:** 本稿は、ミルトンの叙事詩『失樂園』をメタファーとして用い、「エコツーリズム」の陥穽を明らかにする。エコツーリズムに批判的な人々にとっては、この名称は誤称であり、広告戦略である。本稿は、エコツーリズムに関するバランスの取れた見方を提示するために、その定義を見直し、この種の事業を成功させるための課題を検討すると共に、いくつかの失敗例を紹介する。拡大する観光事業の経済的利益を追求することは、自然資源の保護と相いれない。従って、エコツーリズムの失敗は、共同体の資源を破壊し、自然の樂園を次世代から奪う可能性がある。自然とのふれあいを売り物にするエコツーリズム拠点で、持続可能な観光事業を実現するためには、抑制と責任ある計画立案が不可欠であろう。

**キーワード:** エコツーリズム、持続可能な観光事業、責任ある観光事業、『失樂園』、失敗したエコツーリズム

*"This having learnt, thou hast attained the sum  
Of Wisdom; hope no higher, though all the Stars  
Thou knew'st by name, and all th' ethereal Powers,  
All secrets of the deep, all Nature's works,  
Or works of God in Heav'n, Air, Earth, or Sea,  
And all riches of this World enjoy'dst,  
And all the rule, one Empire: only add  
Deeds to thy knowledge answerable, add Faith,*

*Add Virtue, Patience, Temperance, add Love,  
By name to come called Charity, the soul  
Of all the rest: then wilt though not be loth  
To leave this Paradise, but shalt possess  
A paradise within thee, happier far.  
(John Milton, Paradise Lost Book XI, 575–587)*

## 1. Introduction

In Milton's epic *Paradise Lost*, these are the words of Michael, the Archangel who guards the gate of Eden. Michael lectures Adam and Eve as he ushers the errant couple out of Paradise. The Archangel explains to Adam and Eve that despite having fallen from grace, they can still enjoy a fruitful life. However, to ensure a fruitful life with earthly happiness, Michael instructs the couple to live their lives by seven principles: obedience, faith, virtue, patience, temperance, love, and charity. These principles are a guide to creating an inner Paradise. These principles are also in contrast with the seven deadly sins of pride, envy, wrath, sloth, greed, gluttony and lust that Satan uses to create his inner Hell. Michael's words imply that Adam and Eve can feel as if they have never left Paradise if they live their lives according to the seven principles.

How do Michael's words and Milton's epic poem relate to the global boom in ecotourism? For the ecotourist, a chance to visit pristine natural environments and possibly interact with wildlife fulfills a dream of visiting a paradise on earth. And for locals benefiting from ecotourism, it is a chance to open the gates of their Eden and share their paradise with travelers from around the globe. However, in practice, the label "ecotourism" may often be a misnomer that creates a false image. The label promises a wholesome travel experience for the tourist which intends to benefit local communities. Though, in reality, there are questions as to whether or not ecotourism is just a marketing tactic to tempt tourists to bite forbidden fruits. Are not the tour companies that promote ecotours using their Edens to greedily compete for tourists' dollars? Is ecotourism a veil that shrouds the buying and selling of Paradise? Can any type of international tourism truly be eco-friendly?

Although, by definition, ecotourism intends to be a brand of sustainable tourism that encourages protection of environmental resources while creating financial benefits for local communities (Hartman and Cavaliere, 2009; TIES, 2015), skepticism and criticism of ecotourism are rapidly increasing (Jaffe, 2009; Russel and Wallace, 2004; West and

Carrier, 2004). Some critics see the term “ecotourism” as an oxymoron (Mastny, 2002; Wilcox, 2015). These critics find support for their negative views of ecotourism in numerous examples of cases where ecotourism projects have done more harm than good. In spite of negative press due to failed ecotourism projects, proponents of ecotourism continue to use the label as if it were a ticket into an Eden that creates a win-win experience for tourists and hosts while having little impact on the natural environment. Therefore, in order to provide a balanced perspective of ecotourism, this paper will review the definition of ecotourism, discuss the challenges of implementing successful ecotourism projects and provide some examples of ecotourism-gone-wrong.

## **2. What is Ecotourism?**

The International Ecotourism Society defines ecotourism as "responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people, and involves interpretation and education" (TIES, 2015). Since the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century, ecotourism has been one of the fastest-growing tourism sectors. As the popularity of ecotourism grows, so does the broadness of the definition of ecotourism. A broader definition would include any leisure travel that provides an opportunity to enjoy unique features of the natural environment while having minimal negative impact on the environment. Although it is difficult to provide exact numbers of how many global travelers visit ecotourism destinations, estimates using a broad definition of ecotourism put the number of ecotourists at about a quarter of a billion at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. That number translates into approximately US\$1.2 trillion that eco-travelers are spending annually to visit the plethora of *almost-untouched* paradises (West and Carrier, 2004). However, it is not only tourist dollars that widen greedy eyes; it is also the chance of international aid that has governments seeking out in-country opportunities for ecotourism projects. For example, the Asian Development Bank funds tourism initiatives throughout Southeast Asia in an attempt to boost local economies through cultural and ecotourism. The funding is intended for training and infrastructure projects in Cambodia, Viet Nam, Laos and China (Mastny, 2002).

Ever since the United Nations declared 2002 as the “International Year of Ecotourism”, the favorable image of the industry as “green” and “legitimate” has grown into a useful marketing tool (West and Carrier, 2004). Perhaps, in some cases the label is accurate, but that does not mean it should not be questioned. The ecotourist, as a conscientious consumer, has to ask: Is it not possible that the label is just another

contrived marketing cliché such as *sugar-free, low-fat, 0 calories* or *new and improved*? The problem of questioning the genuineness of the industry arises as the current images of ecotourism and ecotourists are “almost wholly benign environmentally, culturally, and economically” (West and Carrier, 2004; p. 484). Therefore, the broadness of the definition and the widely accepted image may preclude both travelers and locals from accurately understanding possible negative impacts of ecotourism projects. Metaphorically, the naïve and trusting tourists in search of a vacation in paradise are as vulnerable to deception as Milton’s version of Adam and Eve; tempted and persuaded into tasting the forbidden fruit without realizing the full impact of the consequences.

### **3. Successful Ecotourism**

For ecotourism initiatives to be successful in both achieving their goals and being sustainable over time, the International Ecotourism Society recommends ecotourism projects be based on several guiding principles:

- Minimize physical, social, behavioral, and psychological impacts.
- Build environmental and cultural awareness and respect.
- Provide positive experiences for both visitors and hosts.
- Provide direct financial benefits for conservation.
- Generate financial benefits for both local people and private industry.
- Deliver memorable interpretative experiences to visitors that help raise sensitivity to host countries' political, environmental, and social climates.
- Design, construct and operate low-impact facilities.
- Recognize the rights and spiritual beliefs of the Indigenous People in the community and work in partnership with them to create empowerment.

(TIES, 2015)

### **4. Perceived Benefits of Ecotourism**

The growing popularity of ecotourism is a result of the perceived benefits it provides. Therefore, it is important to review some of the likely benefits of properly implemented projects. However, it is equally important to understand that these benefits are contingent on the success and the authenticity of any particular ecotourism project. Furthermore, the existence of benefits does not negate the possibility that any ecotourism project could have its disadvantages.

#### **4.1 Generates community income**

Since many ecotourism projects are community-based initiatives that are planned and managed at a local level, local citizens should participate at all stages of the process. Therefore, it is important to augment the bottom-up coordination among local stakeholders, the private sector and national governments (Yoshida, 1997). Maximizing involvement at the community level is a major step toward community empowerment. In areas where people are forced to eke out a living through environmentally unfriendly businesses such as logging, illegal fishing or poaching, community-based ecotourism projects are a means for alternative livelihood. In addition, such projects generate employment locally so young people do not have to leave their homes and families to look for work in urban areas. Community-based projects enable local youths to find employment as tour guides, sell handicrafts, cook in restaurants, serve food and assist tourists in lodging facilities (Janér, Bezerra and Ozorio, 2012). In theory, additional jobs and revenue can lead to improvements in a community's schools, clinics, potable water sources, and general infrastructure. However, how much impact an ecotourism project has on the standard of living may depend on how great a role bottom-up management of the project has in the decision-making process.

#### **4.2 Raises conservation awareness**

Ecotourism is an avenue for the dissemination of environmental knowledge and information and thus contributes to the educational initiative for building a greater awareness of the challenges of managing the world's natural resources, such as forests, rivers, coastlines and wildlife. New knowledge helps to change attitudes and behavior about how to protect the natural environment through the creation of national parks, wildlife preserves and marine parks. The money tourists pay in sanctuary entrance fees, camping fees, tour fees and taxes help to fund conservation work and community development. Tourist dollars can also help to fight environmentally destructive behaviors such as dynamite fishing, illegal logging, destructive farming and overfishing (English, 2002).

#### **4.3 Promotes intercultural communication**

An additional benefit of ecotourism is that it creates an opportunity for tourists to interact with members of the local community. Unlike the traditional tourist looking for a relaxing holiday at a hotel, the ecotourist is committed to crossing the invisible

barriers between hosts and guest. By definition, ecotourism projects are designed to promote intercultural communication that begins with members of the local community sharing information about their natural environment with visitors. Therefore, the eco-traveler has greater opportunity to acquire a deep understanding of local lifestyles and customs. This can foster an interest that helps to preserve the region's heritage, provide a market for local handicrafts, promote traditional festivals and increase awareness of native ceremonies and art forms.

#### **4.4 Advocates a global environmental ethic**

In theory, as more people and communities participate in ecotourism, eco-values and eco-principles flourish. Environmentally responsible practices among stakeholders in the tourist industry will spread to more establishments globally; thus, encouraging the practices of recycling, using renewable energy sources, maintaining water-conservation schemes and ensuring safe waste disposal. Although the development of a global environmental ethic is a perceived benefit of ecotourism, there is paucity in research data to support that this is actually happening (Sharpley, 2009).

### **5. Is Ecotourism Sharing Eden or Selling Eden?**

How true is the label “ecotourism”? The popularity of the term “ecotourism” has made it a confusing label. It has become difficult to understand what tour operators mean when they tack on the “eco” label to their product. The label sells, but it is not always a true label. “Green-washing” a tour with the “eco” label is an advertising tactic to tempt and trick unsuspecting tourists who would like to feel good about making “green” choices during their holidays.

In theory, successful ecotourism projects can yield many benefits with minimal negative impact to the environment and minimal strain on a community’s resources. However, such success is dependent on the absence of the seven deadly sins of pride, envy, wrath, sloth, greed, gluttony and lust. Here the connection between ecotourism and *Paradise Lost* becomes clearer. Although ecotourism destinations are paradises, they exist in an imperfect world, and are governed by human imperfection. As Adam and Eve had free will, so do all the stakeholders in ecotourism projects and it is our human nature for temptation to guide the decisions we make. As in the Biblical Paradise that Milton used for his epic poem, Man has free will; and by nature, Man will side with greed. The following sections will address issues on how temptation increases the

likelihood of ecotourism projects having negative impact on the environment to the degree that some paradises are being lost.

### **5.1 Ecotourism as an oxymoron**

An oxymoron is a figure of speech that juxtaposes seemingly contradictory concepts in the same expression. Common oxymora are “an open secret”, “virtual reality” and “original copies”. The label “ecotourism” combines two contradictory concepts: ecology and tourism. Ecology is synonymous with environmentalism. However, the very nature of tourism is contradictory to the concept of environmentalism. Russel and Wallace (2004) emphasize the dichotomy between “eco” and “tourism” by questioning the value of having an eco-friendly hotel in the Costa Rican rain forest, when the “international tourists visiting it have all come on ten-hour journeys by ozone-depleting, carbon dioxide-producing jet aircraft” (p.2). Even staunch proponents of ecotourism, Hartman and Cavaliere (2009) admit that “one of the worst environmental actions you can do is to buy a plane ticket” (p. 77).

Travel to a destination, and especially international travel, comes with a cost to the environment. Still, the impact on the environment is only likely to increase as the tourist arrivals increase. Since ecotourism is a business and the stakeholders want to generate more income, they are motivated to do all that is possible to attract more tourists. Therefore, there becomes a need to build roads or ports to transport tourists. Transportation requires fuel. According to Sharpley (2009), “The very existence of fossil-fueled land, sea and air travel on a mass scale is environmentally unsustainable...whilst tourism development more generally is ‘resource-hungry’” (p. 198). In addition to transportation for tourists, food must be brought in or grown locally. Human waste needs a disposal system. And to meet these needs could only have the absolute smallest predictable impact of an ecotourism project on the environment. That prediction might be accurate, if, and only if, every tourist and every stakeholder acts in a maximum responsible way toward the environment. Given our human nature and the tendency to make bad choices, acting with maximum responsibility all the time is highly unlikely.

Another argument for how ecotourism is an oxymoron is that the very nature of an open-market business venture dictates manipulating a product to cater to the consumer’s image. The consumer’s image of a destination may often be one that is more comfortable or easily accessible than occurs in the natural world. Therefore, the tour promoters must advertise an experience that meets the expectations of the eco-consumer.

West and Carrier (2004) explain this, “And those who seek to attract ecotourists are obliged by logic of the market to try to reshape the nature and culture on offer to fit this image (p. 491).”

### **5.2 Inevitable costs of revealing nature’s secrets**

It is undeniable that any form of tourism and even ecotourism will take a toll on the natural environment. Despite a dichotomy between the meanings of “eco” and “tourism”, the label is here to stay. In spite of that, ecotourists and communities building ecotourism projects should be aware that the label does not mean that ecotourism is a brand of tourism that is actually good for the environment. More importantly, all stakeholders in the planning and implementation of ecotourism projects need to understand the unavoidable impacts to the environment because awareness is a first step toward responsible tourism (Sharpley, 2009).

Janér, Bezerra and Ozorio (2012) identify seven potential sources for negative impacts that ecotourism projects can have on the environment: *energy, water, sewage, food, waste (organic and inorganic), over capacity of tourists and logistics*. Although they specifically refer to the Mamirua Sustainable Development Reserve in Brazil’s Amazon Basin, their analysis is applicable to ecotourism projects anywhere. Accommodating tourists requires energy. If all the energy for water heating and electricity comes from solar or wind power, there is little impact on the environment. If other sources are used, the project becomes less green. Likewise, the complications of establishing eco-friendly septic filter systems, maintaining food supplies, disposing of waste, avoiding over capacity situations and ensuring eco-friendly marine and overland transportation to remote destinations are all likely to have some impact on the environment. For tour operators who are vigilant about being responsible in their venture to keep a project sustainable, it might be possible to minimize negative impact on the natural environment. However, all too often, projects with the “eco” label fall short of what would be called responsible tourism and the result is ecotourism-gone-wrong.

## **6. Paradise is Lost When Ecotourism Goes Wrong**

Hidden by photos of pristine natural environments, there is often a different picture of the reality of what happens on an ecotour. Eric Jaffe (2009) describes several ecotourism projects that have had adverse effects on the natural environment. In one

case, he explains that disturbance from the 10,000 annual visitors to the Chilean island of Damas has led to a drastic reduction of the penguin population. At another destination, over-visitation of tourists to a turtle sanctuary has led to a growing garbage problem on the beaches of Tortuguero in Costa Rica. In Japan, the Ogasawara Islands have often been called the Galapagos Islands of the East. Although much of the indigenous fauna and flora have disappeared due to human settlements and development in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there is a community-based tourist industry that survives on a steady flow of visitors that arrive by ferry to enjoy the remaining natural habitat of the islands. However, the desire to attract more visitors is the cause of an on-going debate to build an airport that could negatively impact the remaining natural resources of the islands (Guo, 2009).

In addition to the natural environment, ecotourism can also have economic and social impacts contrary to the perceived benefits. In the case of Belize, Duffy (2000) eludes to connections between ecotourism, political corruption, offshore banking and drug trafficking. Though ecotourism and corruption may be extreme, there are still obvious economic and social impacts to tourism. Horton (2009) describes a situation in Costa Rica where ecotourism on the Osa Peninsula appears to “have intensified a more long-term dynamic of capitalistic modernization, a movement away from a rural Costa Rican culture of frugality and commitment to family and social relations toward greater consumerism, commodification and efficiency” (p.100). It is likely that this phenomenon is not specific to Costa Rica, but more a symptom of global development. The point is that the ecotourism boom is part of a global tourism boom that will change not only the environment, but also the simple, innocent way of life in villages, rural areas and small island communities to fit a globally generic norm of consumerism.

One graphic account of ecotourism-gone-wrong comes from Christie Wilcox’s (2015) description of her personal experience of viewing manta rays in Kona, Hawaii. The manta ray ecotourism project is a major business on the rural island. Manta ecotourism attracts as many as 50,000 visitors a year for local revenue of US\$3.4 million. Wilcox describes the day she went diving off the Kona Coast:

As the sun set, 25 boats converged on a small patch of reef just a few hundred yards from the shore of Kona, Hawaii. With only four moorings, most of the boats illegally dropped anchor on the coral, dangerously tied themselves to other boats, or simply kept their engines running: a serious hazard if there are people in the

water. And boy, were there people in the water. Between the snorkelers and us divers, there were a few hundred, all of whom made a frenzied dash for the water as soon as darkness fell. The chaos on the surface overwhelmed us, and we anxiously waited for chains of snorkelers to move away from our boat so we could descend below it.

Underwater, things got even worse. Lights in all directions from the dozens of dive groups disoriented us, and we were tossed this way and that by the high surge as our dive master attempted to move large, venomous urchins out of the way with tongs so we could sit on the reef. She instructed us to hold tight to the coral — even though touching the coral can kill it — as the water pushed us this way and that.

Wilcox's account is not that different from those of other tourists who go on dolphin watching tours off Balicasag Island or swimming with whale sharks off the coast of Cebu Island in the Philippines. Similarly, land ecotourism projects conjure up images of hordes of camera wielding tourists plunging off the Gray Line Buses in the game parks of Kenya to click away at what is left of a slowly disappearing paradise. These examples are not the exceptions, but rather and unfortunately, the norm. Ecotourism-gone-wrong is an adverse intervention that alters both the natural environment and the behavior of the animals in that environment. Even worse though, it is the uncontrollable irresponsibility of tour operators and tourists themselves that often does long-term damage to the natural resources of a community; those same resources that ecotourism is supposed to be protecting.

## **7. Conclusion: Once the Fruit is Bitten**

The desire to maximize tourism revenue results in people seeking short-term gains without realizing the long-term detrimental effects. It is important that all levels of government take effective measures to ensure ecotourism initiatives maintain sustainable use of the natural resources and their associated ecosystems. Stakeholders in ecotourism projects need to find a balance between capitalizing on the economic benefits of increased tourism and protecting their natural resources for future generations. Tourism-gone-wrong can ruin a community's resources and create an

environmental refugee situation in which locals need to leave a once pristine area due to the impact of too many tourists. Increased tourism creates a strain on potable water sources, waste management and arable land. Effective ecotourism projects should begin with educating local community members by raising awareness of detrimental practices and nurturing a new social consciousness that will result in symbiotic relationships with nature. For small island communities, mountain villages, animal sanctuaries and other common ecotourism destinations that advertise their closeness with nature, restraint and responsible planning are essential to achieve sustainable tourism.

Ecotourism should be a tool to encourage thoughtfully planned community development based on a shared attitude toward stewardship of valuable natural resources. That shared attitude is a product of common environmental morals and ethics. Perhaps the roots of common environmental morals and ethics are in the seven principles that the Archangel Michael gave to Adam and Eve. If the shareholders in ecotourism projects were to follow the advice that the Archangel Michael gave to Adam and Eve, the goals of ecotourism could be accomplished. Abiding by the seven principles; obedience, faith, virtue, patience, temperance, love, and charity could enable the Edens of our planet to remain paradises for our future generations to appreciate and enjoy.

## References

- Duffy, Rosaleen (2000) Shadow Players: Ecotourism Development, Corruption and State Politics in Belize. *Third World Quarterly*, 21 (3), pp. 549 – 565.
- English, Brian J. (2002) *Environmental Education in Community-Based Coastal Resource Management: A Case Study of Olango Island, Philippines*. Published dissertation, University of Southern California. Retrieved from <http://digitallibrary.usc.edu/cdm/ref/collection/p15799coll16/id/268586>
- Guo, Nanyan (2009) Environmental Culture and World Heritage in Pacific Japan: Saving the Ogasawara Islands. *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, 7 (17:3, pp.1 -18).
- Hartman, Eviana and Caveliere, Christina (2009) Ecotourism Helps Protect the Environment. In Roman Espejo (Ed.) *What is the Impact of Tourism?* Farmington Hills, Michigan: Greenhaven Press.
- Horton Lynn R. (2009) Buying up Nature: Economic and Social Impacts of Costa Rica's Ecotourism Boom. *Latin American Perspectives*, 36 (3), pp. 93 -107.
- Jaffe, Eric (2009) Ecotourism Can Harm the Environment. In Roman Espejo (Ed.) *What is the Impact of Tourism?* Farmington Hills, Michigan: Greenhaven Press.
- Janér, Ariane, Bezerra, Nelissa Peralta and Ozorio, Rodrigo Zomkowski (2012) Community-Based Ecotourism in a Sustainable Development Reserve in the Amazon Basin. In Philip Sloan, Claudia Simons-Kaufmann and Willy Legrand (Eds.), *Sustainable Hospitality and Tourism as Motors for Development*. New York, NY: Routledge.

- Mastny, Lisa (2002) Ecotourist Trap. *Foreign Policy*, 133 (Nov. – Dec.), pp. 94 -96.
- Russel, Andrew and Wallace, Gillian. (2004). Irresponsible Ecotourism. *Anthropology Today*, 20 (3), pp. 1-2.
- Sharpley, Richard (2009) *Tourism Development and the Environment: Beyond Sustainability?* London: Earthscan.
- The International Ecotourism Society (2015) TIES Announces Ecotourism Principles Revision. Retrieved from <https://www.ecotourism.org/news/ties-announces-ecotourism-principles-revision>
- West, Paige and Carrier, James G. (2004) Ecotourism and Authenticity Getting Away from It All? *Anthropology*, 45 (4), pp. 483 – 498.
- Wilcox, Christie (2015) Is Ecotourism an Oxymoron? A New Study Suggests These “Green” Vacations Might Hurt Wildlife. *Washington Post*, October 10, 2015.
- Yoshida, Masahito (1997) Perspective of Ecotourism in Japan and East Asia. *Japan InfoMAB*, No. 21, pp. 1-12.

---

Received on January 5, 2017.