Can Ecotourism in the Global South Develop the North?

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ABSTRACT

Ecotourism is often framed as a development tool in the traditional sense of bringing capital to developing countries in exchange for an exported good. Unlike most commodities however, tourism does not merely bring capital to the South, it brings people. While recognizing that the presence of Northern bodies has often been seen as a concrete example of power inequity between the North and South, in this paper I argue that the embodied nature of this exchange allows for the potential of a type of development that moves from South to North through the generation of what is termed biotic capital. Biotic capital refers to the size and coherence of 1) an environmental imaginary, 2) the individuals within that imaginary and 3) the biophysical. Biotic capital that promotes sustainability is created through the reinforcement of already existing environmental orientations as well as recruitment of tourists by messages perceived as apolitical.

Keywords: Biotic Capital, Costa Rica, Ecotourism, Imaginary, Nature Assemblage, Political Ecology, Sustainable Development

INTRODUCTION

Rooted in the insights of authors like Donella Meadows (1972) and Rachel Carson (2002) sustainable development seeks to balance economic, social and environmental considerations when evaluating the long term effects of a policy or set of policy decisions. By balancing these factors development should meet “…the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Brundtland, 1987, p. 15). Perhaps due in part to the ubiquity of the phrase “sustainable development” in so many fields, and its attachments to policies that were not sustainable in any meaningful way, it has been pilloried as nonsensical, especially the ambiguity of “needs” (Redclift, 1993). It has also been called oxymoronic given the inherent tension between economic development (Schnaiberg, 1980) and the environment (Lele, 1991). Still, as Sharpley (2000) points out, “…the inherent ambiguity of the concept is, paradoxically, its strength” (p. 3), in part because the concept provides, “…a forum at which a multitude of viewpoints can be addressed” (p. 2).

It is in this latter spirit that I frame this discussion of “connecting to nature” as a force of sustainable development in the North. Sustainable development has traditionally been

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understood as a North to South process providing economic and intellectual capital to alleviate poverty while not destroying the environment in the global South (McMichael, 2011). Interestingly the rare use of the term applied to the United States has often been linked to studies in Appalachia (e.g., Glasmeier & Farrigan, 2003) that some literature refers to using Bailey and Flores’s (1973) “internal colony” model (e.g., Lewis, 1978; Walls, 1978). Critics of Northern development patterns have long argued that in order for our economic, social and environmental policies to promote sustainability real changes must occur in not just how internal colonies, but society at large relate to the environment (Commoner, 1973; P. Ehrlich, A. Ehrlich & Holdren 1973; Leopold, 1986). Environmental sociology has examined the degree to which cultural and social forces can shape, and make more sustainable, a society’s environmental, social and economic policies (Catton & Dunlap, 1978). While many forces shape environmental orientations there is evidence that if individuals feel more a part of the environment they are more likely to take it into account in their voting, advocacy, purchasing and lifestyle decisions (Cottrell, 2003; Dunlap & Van Liere, 2008; Steel, 1996). A sense of connection to nature may not be a sufficient condition to make policies in the North more sustainable it may be a necessary one. It is following this insight that this paper joins the conversation, exploring the phenomenon of tourists “connecting to nature” while on an ecotour in the global South and thus possibly returning to the North as agents of sustainable development.

In order to examine this question the paper has a second task of developing language to describe, sociologically, the phenomenon of “connecting” as well as “nature” as described by the study’s participants. The challenges in developing this language are first, to acknowledge the diverse understandings of nature as presented by individual participants while establishing commonality, secondly to incorporate the non-social biophysical aspects of nature and thirdly define “connecting” in such a way as to make it a comparable and useful concept in development and environmental literature.

**ECOTOURISM, SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND “CONNECTING TO NATURE”**

It is no surprise that over the past two decades ecotourism has been a regular part of development plans from non-governmental as well as inter-governmental development agencies (Brohman, 1996; Butler, 2004; Stronza 2008; Sharpley, 2008; Weaver, 2001). After all, it has been touted as a sustainable mechanism because of its promise to provide a non-extractive, low impact, culturally sensitive revenue generator for communities in ecologically fragile areas, often in the Global South (Ceballos-Lascurain, 1996; Honey, 1999; UNEP/WTO, 2005). The vast majority of study on ecotourism as development has focused on this promise and where it has (Weinberg, Bellows & Ekster, 2002; Xu, Wan & Yang, 2007) or has not been (Pleumarom, 2012; Sharpley 2000) realized. Others still have argued that this may have been a false promise from the start (Mowforth & Munt 2008).

A second promise of ecotourism visible in many advertising campaigns promoting excursions in the global South is to the tourist: the promise that she will connect (or reconnect) with nature. This second promise is rarely explicitly linked to the first, with the tourist acting as an agent of sustainable development upon their return to the North, although the possibility is mentioned in some literature (Buckley, 2009; Honey, 1999; Weaver, 2001).

Before continuing, I want to acknowledge the very real concerns that some might have about this work sidestepping the unequal, and historically exploitive, power relations that have characterized tourist/host relations. These concerns inform much of my research and I in no way mean to diminish these critiques of tourism as development. Rather I feel that there exists sufficient evidence to explore the possibility that while tourists might journey on the paths created by Northern exploitation of the South,
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