Ecotourism as a Western Construct

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Most of the burgeoning literature on ecotourism is essentially Western-centric, insofar as it accepts as given an approach that is deeply embedded in Western cultural, economic and political processes. Despite the plethora of definitions as to what actually constitutes ecotourism (Fennell, 2003; Page & Dowling, 2002), the most common denominator is that it is nature-based. However, in the same way that Macnaghten and Urry (1998: 95) suggest that ‘there is no single “nature”, only natures’, it therefore follows that ‘nature tourism’ will be variously constructed by different societies and therefore that there will be multiple ‘nature tourisms’. Despite the fact that it should be obvious that it is patently not the case that ‘one size fits all’ we have witnessed the internationalisation of ecotourism, as evolved from a Western ‘classical conservationist’ approach (suggested by Mowforth and Munt (2003) to be more akin to preservationism), and its apparent universality as a concept. This paper examines how this has come about before moving on to consider how uncritical acceptance of Western-constructed ecotourism and a failure to recognise that there is no universal or unique understanding will only serve to reinforce rather than reduce the very inequalities that it may attempt to reduce.

Keywords: culture and ecology, ethnocentrism, exclusion, exclusivity, hegemony, indigenous people

Introduction

The endorsement of ecotourism by the United Nations (UN) through the designation of 2002 as the International Year of Ecotourism (IYE) bears testament to the internationalisation of an approach which is deeply embedded in Western cultural, economic and political processes. Concern was voiced from several quarters over the seeming legitimisation of ecotourism by the UN, with southern non-governmental organisations (NGOs), in particular, expressing their concern that the floodgates would be opened to eco-opportunistic Western exploitation. In a letter to Kofi Annan the Thailand-based Third World Network (TWN) expressed their view that:

Because nature-based tourism is one of the world’s most lucrative niche markets, powerful transnational corporations are likely to exploit the IYE to impose their own definitions of ecotourism, while people-centred initiatives will be squeezed out…. Ecotourism’s ‘bad’ policies and practices far outweigh the ‘good’ examples. We fear that the IYE, in combination with the globalization policies, will make things worse…. We demand a complete review of ecotourism issues that take into consideration the political, social, economic and developmental conditions and the serious issues of globalisation. (TWN, 2001)
Vivanco (2002: 26) voiced concern that the IYE did not ‘confront the structural inequalities that characterize ecotourism’s origins and practice’ and that it attempted ‘to force people everywhere into the same cultural, economic and political mould’. How has ecotourism come to occupy such a centre-stage position globally? Both the TWN letter and the quote from Vivanco point to the main reason: ecotourism is but a process cast in a world where relationships of power are characterised by marked centre-periphery dominance. There is a lot to suggest that, because the origins of ecotourism lie in Western ideology and values, and its practice is frequently dominated by Western interests, the advocacy of ecotourism as a universal template arises from Western hegemony. This is reflected in the institutionalisation of ecotourism through influential and powerful, supranational organisations, Western donor agencies, INGOs, NGOs and industry alliances, often working in partnership which strengthens their influence yet further. An examination of these reveals how, and why, this has come about.

Ecotourism as Cultural Hegemony

The pervasive influence of Western-envisaged ecotourism needs to be viewed against the backdrop of the global political economy. To paraphrase Blaikie (2000: 1043), who is examining the reasons for the global dominance of the neoliberal development agenda in general, ‘the most powerful reasons why, in my view, are provided by political economy…. Theories, narratives, policies and institutions – the global power-knowledge nexus – drive, and are driven by, global capital’. Jessop (2003: 16) describes how globalisation involves the processes of both ‘time-space distanciation’ and ‘time-space compression’. The former involves ‘the stretching of social relations over time and space so that relations can be controlled or co-ordinated over longer periods of time … and over longer distances, greater areas, or more scales of activity’ while the latter involves ‘the intensification of “discrete” events in real time and/or the increased velocity of material and immaterial flows over a given distance’. So we can see that not only does Western power and knowledge have a global reach, but also how that scope has become intensified, or deepened, and speeded up. The process is both circular and cumulative whereby centre-periphery dominance is both perpetuated and reinforced precisely because ‘differential abilities to compress time and space become major bases of power and resistance in the emerging global order’ (Jessop, 2003).

It is not surprising, therefore, that EuroAmerican paradigms of sustainability and development, and, very much associated with both of these, the Western construct of ecotourism, have become all powerful and persuasive. Mowforth and Munt (2003) refer to the ‘tripatite marriage’ between sustainability, globalisation and development. They claim that sustainability is ‘a concept charged with power…. The crucial questions must remain: Who defines what sustainability is? How is it to be achieved? And who has ownership of its representation and meaning?’ These questions therefore apply to sustainable tourism and hence to ecotourism. Global governance institutions play increasingly significant roles in mainstreaming sustainability as they ‘involve the production, but more importantly the enforcement, of a global ideological
framework’ (Hartwick & Peet, 2003). This is particularly so with the case of environmental concern which, as Hartwick and Peet (2003) describe, was ‘ideo-
logically and institutionally incorporated into the global neoliberal hegemony of the late twentieth century’ such that ‘the global capitalist economy can grow, if not with clear environmental conscience, then with one effectively assuaged’. This they describe as a process of neoliberal deflection which is evident in the ‘legitimising camouflage’ as Rist describes it (cited in Mowforth & Munt, 2003) of the term sustainable development. Southgate and Sharpley (2002) describe the mainstreaming of sustainable development, lamenting that

The perpetuation of sustainable development’s underlying assumptions has achieved little more than justifying conventional top-heavy, interventionist approaches to environmental and developmental initiatives in much of the developing world, reinforcing public acceptance of sustainable development initiatives, and the institutions vested with responsibility for implementing it. (Southgate & Sharpley, 2002)

This criticism is equally applicable to sustainable tourism. Hall (2005) calls for an ‘examination of the role of the supranational organizations such as the World Tourism Organisation (WTO) and the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) in enhancing the power and privileges of local elites in developing countries and their promotion of the myth of sustainable tourism’. The fact that the WTO achieved international legitimacy through its designation as a specialised agency of the UN in 2003, changing its acronym to UNWTO in 2005, is evidence of its global reach. Furthermore, we witness the deepening, or implosive phase as Hoogvelt (1997) describes it, of globalisation as Western-based electronic media instantly communicate awareness of WTO and WTTC initiatives across the globe. This is graphically illustrated by the promotion of the WTO/UNEP guide Making Tourism Sustainable: A Guide for Policy Makers, to be published in September 2006, by travelwirenews (3 October 2005). The potential of electronic newsletters to intensify as well as consolidate the influence of Western tourism ideology is evident when it is considered that by 2005 the US-based TravelWireNews and eTurboNews had a circulation of 214,000 to travel trade professionals and 7300 journalists around the globe (having grown from 26,000, mostly US, subscribers at launch in 2001).

The declared purpose of the forthcoming WTO-UNEP publication is to provide tourism decision makers with guidance and a framework for the development of policies for more sustainable tourism, a toolbox of instruments that they can use to implement these policies . . . a basic reference book [which] provides a blueprint for governments to formulate and implement sustainable tourism policies.

While it will draw on a research survey undertaken among WTO member states in 2003 and 2004 ‘to identify specific policies and tools applied in their territories that had effectively contributed to making their tourism sector more sustainable’ this was obviously conducted within existing power structures both between and within nations. It is significant that the WTO refers to this forthcoming publication as ‘a blueprint’. The title of the World
Tourism and Travel Council’s (WTTC) 2003 publication *Blueprint for New Tourism* even more explicitly spells out this notion of a universal template.

WTTC has consistently lobbied for the expansion of travel infrastructure, the liberalisation of policies to encourage tourism industry growth, and the removal of physical, bureaucratic and fiscal barriers to travel (Mowforth & Munt, 2003). As a strong advocate of self-regulation, WTTC launched its Green Globe scheme in 1994 which introduced standards for environmental management in travel and tourism in 1998. While it is not the intention of this paper to enter into the heated debate surrounding tourism certification and accreditation schemes, it is pertinent to reflect that such endorsements ‘may be used to further enfranchise the powerful tourism companies’ (Honey & Rome, 2001). Detractors of the certification and accreditation process voice their concern that it is ‘a method to exclude, to cartelise and to club so that the weak lose their autonomy and come under the hegemony of the strong’ (Rao, 2001). Pleumaron (2001) calls for certification to be seen ‘in the context of the parallel push for self-regulation by transnational tourism companies and big business associations such as WTTC and PATA’. Both of these views, therefore, reflect on the inherent structural inequalities at play.

So, it is against the backdrop of the global power-knowledge nexus (Blaikie, 2000) that we need to critically examine ecotourism as a Western construct. Because it may be seen to both reinforce and be reinforced by Western hegemony, as Duffy (2002: 156) suggests, ‘like other neoliberal policies, ecotourism creates a series of problems’. We have considered the influence of supranational institutions above, and turn now to examine how ecotourism has been mainstreamed by other agencies with both a global reach and an intensifying influence.

It is strange to reflect that, until the early 1990s, tourism was seen as an inappropriate avenue for donor finance. With increasing recognition of the conservation/development nexus, and a growing engagement with the need to enhance rural livelihoods through sustainable resource utilisation, Western envisaged ecotourism captured the attention of international funding bodies as an attractive prospect. In 1992, for example, the International Resources Group prepared a report for the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) on ecotourism as a viable alternative for the sustainable management of natural resources in Africa (IRG, 1992).

However, Mowforth and Munt (2003: 60) describe how environmental conditions and caveats which are placed on Western loans and grants promote a greening of social relations which may be viewed as ‘a kind of eco-structural adjustment where Third World people and places must fall in line with First World thinking’. This is particularly evident with the lending of supra-national institutions such as the Global Environmental Facility (GEF) of the World Bank. The GEF is a financial mechanism that provides grants and concessional funds to recipients from developing countries and countries in transition for projects and activities that aim to protect the global environment. Webster (2003) describes how Russia’s greatest protected areas (zapovedniks), which were strict scientific reserves during the communist era, have been opened to ecotourism as a result of $20 million grant from the GEF in 1996 for biodiversity conservation. He cites Ostergren’s argument that ‘the World Bank and the
Russian government are making poor, unrealistic assumptions that succumb to the myth that nature can be protected through free market mechanisms'. Amongst the paradoxes with the GEF is the fact that the World Bank manages the fund (it is implemented by UNDP and UNEP) and yet the World Bank is simultaneously a massive promoter of energy and forest projects, and operates without adequate environmental safeguards effectively implemented in its lending. Ironically, the fund has been used to mitigate environmental problems arising from new projects funded by the World Bank and other institutions (Down to Earth, 2001). In Pakistan, the building of dams and barrages under the Indus Basin Project, funded by contributions from the World Bank and other donors, as well as necessitating the wholesale relocation of a considerable number of settlements, disrupted the distinctive livelihoods of the Indus boat people. GEF Small Grants Projects (SGP) funds have been allocated to an ecotourism initiative at Taunsa barrage to create alternative livelihoods for these boat people in a sanctuary for the Indus River Dolphin (GEF/SGP, undated).

Tickell, cited in Mowforth and Munt (2003: 151) highlights how control of GEF funds by the World Bank leads to the imposition of a neoliberal First World environmental agenda on the allocation of those funds. Furthermore, control is tightened yet further by the fact that, while the donor agencies oversee investment projects and administer funds, it is frequently the case that they link with major INGOs to implement conservationist policies. USAID, for example, frequently channels funding through the World Wildlife Fund (WWF). Seven ecotourism projects in the Russian Far East were funded by USAID through the WWF ‘to develop infrastructure, partner Russian and American tour companies, involve indigenous populations in tourism services, and provide mobile equipment for camping in remote areas’ (ee-environment, 2001). Ecotourism featured as one of the eight activity areas of WWF in Brazil in the year 2000, where WWF was the largest grantee of USAID. One of the most bizarre partnerships was that involved in the development of a community-based ecotourism enterprise in Gunung Halimun National Park (GHNP), Java, Indonesia. Membership of the initiating Consortium of Ecotourism Development in GHNP, as well as government and NGOs, included McDonalds Restaurant Indonesia! Technical assistance and support to the project came from WWF, The Nature Conservancy and World Resources Institute, with funding from USAID (Joy, 1997).

The environmental agenda of the First World INGOs obviously reflects the views of their members or supporters. Thus

Through membership of such organizations, or through a general empathy with their aims, the global concerns and consciousness of First World citizens are played out at a local scale; their ‘will’ is imposed upon communities thousands of miles away. (Mowforth & Munt, 2003: 30)

Conservation International (CI) is a classic case in point. Supported by mega donations such as that of $261 million in 2001 by the co-founder of Intel, Gordon Moore, CI’s mission is ‘to conserve the Earth’s living natural heritage, our global biodiversity, and to demonstrate that human societies are able to live harmoniously with nature’ (Conservation International, 2004). CI’s links
with the World Bank leads them to adopt its approach of advocating corporate schemes, including tourism and ecotourism, which give total management control to the private or NGO sector. In doing so they fail to recognise existence of village conservation movements opposing development projects or the rights of indigenous peoples (Mowforth & Munt, 2003: 152, 278).

Lowe (2006) describes how in 1994 the Jakarta offices of CI (as well as those of WWF and TNC) had Euro-American administrators. While this situation had changed by 1997, so that Indonesian directors oversee domestic programmes, the power of Western ideology may still hold sway under the guise of ‘conventional’ wisdom adopted by professionals worldwide. Mowforth and Munt (2003) examine how tourism professionals are comprised of ‘not just operators in the industry but consultants, journalists, tourism commentators, academics and charities’ who are ‘the opinion formers, the teachers, the advisers, even the ones who take decisions’. They cite the influence of a professional membership NGO with a dedicated ecotourism remit that has become increasingly international in its reach since its inception in 1990. The US-based The Ecotourism Society changed its name to The International Ecotourism Society (author’s italics) in the year 2000. Overseas institutional membership of TIES (it also has individual professional members) listed by region of work or research of 103 in 1994 (The Ecotourism Society, 1995) increased to 443 by 2003 (The International Ecotourism Society, 2003). What is also quite telling, however, is that, whereas 119 North American institutions listed their region of work or research as North America in 2003, 195 gave their residence in North America, indicating that 76, or just under 40%, of North American member institutions have interests elsewhere in the world. Given that the institutional members also include other powerful First World interests such as Conservation International, The Nature Conservancy, and WWF, it is inevitable that western-centric views are likely to prevail. Although, as Mowforth and Munt (2003) point out, the ethos of TIES is how to do ecotourism ‘right’, this is largely within existing power relations which may exacerbate and perpetuate inequalities.

While we need to recognise that hegemony is neither total, nor static, but should be viewed as dynamic and evolving towards a ‘stable equilibrium’ (Johnston et al., 1994), it is undeniable that the power relations described above currently give rise to a situation where Western ideology concerning ecotourism is dominant and all powerful. Cohen (2002) echoes this concern with regard to the concept of sustainability in tourism development in general, arguing that it is open to misuses, ‘not only in the obvious sense of misleading or fraudulent promotion, but in the more insidious sense of its use as an instrument of power in the struggle over rare and valuable environmental or cultural resources’.

The danger of pointing the finger of blame solely at the Western world also needs to be recognised, however. Richter (1989) examines how many nation states in Asia, for example, have used tourism as a tool to elevate their status in international relations, and, as Teo (2002) argues ‘in the discourse on global-local dynamics, it is propitious to ask whether such a view overlooks the role that national economies have moulded for themselves within the global capitalist framework’. In the month immediately following the catastrophic tsunami that hit the coastlines of the Indian Ocean on
26 December 2004 the significance that the region and individual countries affected attach to international tourism became immediately evident. Not long after the disaster the president of PATA declared ‘If you want to help us, book your trip now’, while the chairman of the Sri Lankan Tourist Board, launching the tourism ‘Bounce-Back’ campaign, announced under a month later ‘the country is open for business in a big way’ (Sri Lanka Tourism, 2005). If anything, however, these overtures serve to highlight the extent to which individual nation states are enmeshed in the global tourism industry.

The Sri Lankan government’s proposed US$80 million redevelopment of Arugam Bay on the east coast has met with resistance from local villagers. A local guest house owner declares ‘We don’t want mass tourism with luxury hotels. We would rather promote community-based tourism’ (Raheem quoted in Tourism Concern, 2005). There is also concern that affected coastal populations throughout the region, faced with a loss of traditional livelihoods, may also be faced with being moved from where they lived to make way for tourism development as reconstruction proceeds (Tourism Concern, 2005).

Hoogvelt’s pointed observation that ‘We may try to understand and improve the conditions of life of those who live within our world system, we cannot even think about those who live outside it’ (Hoogvelt, 1985) has poignant resonance for those so blatantly excluded from the global economy.

Mowforth and Munt (2003) argue that it is with environmental conservation that tour companies and tourists have discovered the most effective method of exclusion, or ‘inclusiveness’. This is clearly reflected in the trend towards elitism in ecotourism operations.

Ecotourism as an Elitist Construct

Whatever the calls for ecotourism operations to be basic and low-key in theory, there is a marked tendency for it to translate into expensive and exclusive in practice. Cohen (2002: 272–273) examines how, as pristine, ‘undiscovered’ sites become increasingly more difficult to find, their rarity means that they constitute a ‘new economic resource’ and unspoiled sites harbouring particularly valuable natural or cultural attractions tend to become the most expensive ones.

Two recent contenders for a major tourism industry award for sustainable tourism initiatives bear witness to this fact. Cousine Island Resort, in the Seychelles describes itself as ‘Seychelles’ premier private island resort. This remote island can be reached only by private charter helicopter… Resort occupancy is limited to 10 guests’. The peak season rate for this exclusivity is US$1280 per person per night (Asiatravel, 2004). Tiger Mountain Lodge is situated 1000 feet above the Pokhara valley in Nepal. The 19-room lodge commands panoramic views of the Himalaya. As well as entering the 2003 sustainable tourism award, Tiger Mountain Lodge has won several awards including the Conde Nast Traveler magazine Ecotourism Award 2000, and Highly Commended Status for the Conservation International Ecotourism Excellence Awards 2000. Given the outstanding natural setting of the lodge, it is staggering, however, to find that ‘There is a secluded swimming pool, in a strategic site that reflects the high mountains and drops away to the
Bijaypur River below’ (The Travel Mall, 2004). The exclusivity and exclusionary nature of both locations is evident when we find that Paul McCartney and Heather Mills spent their honeymoon at the former, while Princess Anne stayed at the latter in 2000.

While the environmental performance of such up-market locales may be laudable, state-of-the-art eco-technology does not come cheap. The operator of Lao Pako ecotourism lodge, Lao PDR estimated that it would take at least two years to recover the outlay required to install imported solar panels and heavy duty back-up batteries (W. Pf abolition, Lao Pako, 1997, personal communication). The gap between grassroots initiatives and locales backed by wealthy, often Western, investors widens still further, and will only be accentuated by applying Western standards of environmental performance in the certification schemes mentioned above.

It is undeniable that the visiting elite gain considerable social capital from visiting such exclusive locations. Inevitably, this may lead to the view that they are ‘places to be collected, as if the people who live there are either irrelevant or at best incidental to the place’ (Mowforth & Munt, 2003: 211). Rather than the essential requirement of active participation to generate local benefits the picture is frequently one of passive recipience or patronisation. Even local inputs, such as agricultural products, are unlikely to meet the high quality criteria demanded by an up-market clientele. Consequently ‘the benefits accruing to the local community, even if significant relative to other sources of income, usually constitute only a fraction of the profits generated by the enterprise’ (Cohen, 2002: 273). Furthermore, tourism to such rare and valuable sites may be environmentally sustainable, but effectively using the price mechanism to restrict numbers and thus guaranteeing low density and exclusivity restricts participation to a tiny minority of elite tourists. As Cohen (2002: 273–274) points out, not only does this ‘block access to such sites to the vast majority of potential visitors who cannot afford the costs’ but also such discrimination excludes ‘not only foreign visitors who cannot afford the price, but especially domestic ones’.

**Ecotourism as a Form of Patronisation**

There has been considerable disappointment registered concerning the failure of ecotourism to deliver its promises in terms of locally realised benefits and enhanced local livelihoods. Wells and Brandon (1992) document how an analysis of 23 Integrated Conservation-Development Projects (ICDPs), most with ecotourism components, revealed that few benefits went to local people or served to enhance protection of adjacent wildlands. It is usually the case that active local participation is overwhelmingly confined to low-skilled, low paid, often seasonal, employment. Also the gap between those who are so engaged and those not involved in tourism in the community is likely to widen. Entus (2002), for example, describes how pre-existing divisions of power may be engendered or exacerbated, leading to the formation of new business elites, who represent a small fraction of the local community. Nepal et al. (2002) show that a large lodge operator in the Annapurna region of Nepal will receive an annual income of over 10 times that of a trekking
porter and more than 40 times that of an agricultural labourer. Nyaupane and Thapa (2004) found in a survey of residents of the Annapurna Sanctuary Trail that 68% of respondents strongly agreed that income distribution was unequal in the area.

Benefits to the community at large by way of visitor donations may be viewed as tokenist patronisation. For example, however well-meaning, the raising of funds from guests staying at Ol Donyo Wuas Lodge, Chyulu Hills in Kenya to cover medical expenses for members of the Maasai Group Ranch on which the lodge is located may be viewed as such, particularly when the lodge boasts of ‘exclusive use of the 300,000 acre ranch which means approximately 17,000 acres per guest, so no worries about the crowds’ (Ultimate Africa Safaris, 2004). This is especially so when local scouts are trained to patrol the area for ‘bushmeat poachers’, while guests can participate in shooting safaris – one rule for the rich, another for the poor.

Fundamentally, the idea that participation is a cure-all for political and social exclusion has been increasingly challenged. Mowforth and Munt (2003: 214) suggest that local participation may not be working, citing Taylor’s view that this is because ‘it has been promoted by the powerful, and is largely cosmetic…. but most ominously it is used as a “hegemonic” device to secure compliance to, and control by, existing power structures’. Participatory approaches are, in themselves, part of these power structures and consequently ‘programmes designed to bring the excluded in often result in forms of control that are more difficult to challenge, as they reduce spaces of conflict and are relatively benign and liberal’ (Kothari, 2001: 143). Walley (2004: 264) in her analysis of the ‘social drama’ of Mafia Island Marine Park also draws attention to the fact that all that we are witnessing may be a repackaging of the status quo such that ‘the merging of conservation and development agendas, the isolation of ecotourism as a development strategy, and the role of participation and transnational bureaucracies, are not ruptures, but rather build upon and work through existing and historical institutional structures and power relationships’.

The view that outsiders may have of traditional lifestyles may also be viewed as patronising. In the same way that anti-developmentists romanticise the lifestyles of indigenous peoples (Corbridge, 1995) so, too, may Western-constructed ecotourism assume an artificial, ‘zooified’ lifestyle on local populations, simultaneously assuming that the poor are happy as they are. This approach tends to ignore local peoples’ aspirations for higher living standards founded on a clear understanding of the costs and benefits of development. As Brandon and Margoluis (1996) suggest, wholesale, unconditional acceptance of ecotourism as a sole development strategy by local people is both unlikely and unrealistic. Poor households’ income needs are not fixed and they are likely to aspire beyond just holding their own economically. Consequently, they may divert to, or supplement with, other, less sustainable activities, particularly when the dimension of seasonality of tourism visitation is added into the equation.

One of the principles of ecotourism is that it should incorporate an educative component (Page & Dowling, 2002). However, while there is increasing recognition that indigenous knowledge is an important component of
interpretation, it is undeniable that, once again, western views prevail and assume that First World conceptions of management are superior (Mowforth & Munt, 2003: 148). It is vital that it is recognised that education is a two-way process and that there is much to be learned from the long histories of ecological management undertaken by local indigenous communities. Indeed, it is necessary to recognise the inextricability of the natural and the cultural in ecotourism localities (Hall, 1994). It is suggested, for example, that the islanders of Ono, Kadavu province, Fiji were more amenable to the concept of a no-take zone in the establishment of a marine protected area because it reflected their traditional practice of *tabu ni qoliqoli*, reserving a traditional fishing ground in order to increase the fish population for a traditional ceremony (WWF, undated).

**Culture and Ecology**

So, we are faced with a situation where the dominant, Western-centric, environmental imagination has given rise to what Vivanco (2002) calls ecotourism’s ‘universalistic and self-serving vision’. The danger of this ethnocentric bias is that it ignores the fact that there are ‘multiple natures’ constructed variously by different societies. As Macnaghten and Urry (1998: 95) declare ‘there is no single “nature”, only natures. And these natures are not inherent in the physical world but discursively constructed through economic, political and cultural processes’. Walley (2004: 14) draws attention to the dynamics of ‘the ways in which ideas of development, nature, and participation are variously understood, appropriated, disputed and used’. Lowe (2006) describes how ‘any understanding of nature will always depend upon processes of representation and the perspectives and actions of those claiming or attempting to represent such nature’. She goes on to argue that ‘the knowledges, rationalities, and natures in Southern biodiversity conservation cannot be understood through the language of assimilation or adaptation in the tropics of a project that originated in more temperate climates’.

The crucial issue with Western envisaged ecotourism is that it can fail to recognise, or downplays, the fundamentally divergent values and interests between the promoters and targets of ecotourism. The dominant ideology behind ecotourism of conservation-for-development may quite often not resonate with other, non-Western, societies. As a North American indigenous person declares ‘that is not necessarily consistent with our traditional view of guardianship and protection’ (Taylor cited in Vivanco, 2002: 26). Wearing and McDonald describe how:

The concept of conservation originates from a western world that is indeed very different from village life, and as such it represents a new time – new ways of thinking about the environment – that is foreign to the communities. The concept implicitly suggests that the environment should be thought of in terms of scarcity, or threats to scarcity; this being an understanding of the environment which is foreign to communities who have traditionally lived in an ecologically sustainable manner. (Wearing & McDonald, 2002: 199)
They go on to cite Flannery’s observation that Western notions of conservation often appear to be completely nonsensical to the local people in Papua New Guinea where ‘the Melanesian world-view incorporates humans and animals, the seen and unseen, the living and the dead, in a way that is vastly different from the European outlook’.

Alternative views, which arise from a ‘generally holistic (or cosmovision view) of nature held by indigenous peoples’ (Colchester, cited in Mowforth & Munt, 2003: 154) mean that not only will there be a fundamental difference between how nature tourism, and hence ecotourism, is constructed in different societies, but also that indigenous communities may have a real problem with the effective commodification of nature through ecotourism.

With the burgeoning domestic and regional tourism in developing and transitional economies, it is increasingly evident that nature tourism is variously constructed by different societies and therefore there are multiple ‘nature tourisms’. For example at Tiger Leaping gorge, Yunnan province, China, a new road was carved along the side of this deep gorge on the Yangtze, and 500 concrete steps constructed down to the river to facilitate visitation by a large number of domestic visitors (Cater, 2001). For these domestic tourists, the experience takes on the guise of a pilgrimage. Petersen (1995) documents how the Chinese domestic visitor’s motivation is a voluntary cultural decision, akin to a pilgrimage to historical, cultural and political centres. Winchester (1996) substantiates this fact in his travelogue on the Yangtze; he describes the poetic identity of the river for the Chinese, reflected in literature, poetry and art. Lindberg et al. (1997) document how levels of crowding are more tolerable to Chinese than to Western visitors. In addition, it must be recognised that Eastern cultures tend to favour human manipulation of nature in order to enhance its appeal compared to its preservation in a pristine state.

Another example is that of Mt Bromo National Park, Indonesia. Cochrane (2000, 2003) describes how group sizes for East Asian visitors averaged 20 and that for Indonesian tourists 15.5, compared with only 2.2 for non-Asian visitors. Most of the Indonesian visitors arrived in family groups or as small groups of friends, and 56% of those surveyed had been there before. A quarter of respondents gave recreation as their main purpose of visit. Cochrane points out that taman nasional (National Park in Indonesian) are not distinguished from other, more artificial, types of taman, such as amusement parks or urban parks. This is because the word taman normally means garden ‘and for most people conjures up a heavily managed environment’. Consequently national parks such as Mt Bromo ‘are viewed principally as places for relaxation and general leisure, with concomitant expectations of amenities’ (Cochrane, 2003: 119, 192).

Thus it can be seen that the construction of nature by different ethnicities may result in markedly divergent tastes and demands that do not conform to Western views of ecotourism. While, as Weaver (2002) suggests, the extent to which Asian markets will be influenced by Western models of ecotourism participation is unknown, he argues for peculiarly ‘Asian’ models of ecotourism that, for cultural reasons, deviate from the conventional Western-centric constructs. Chung (2005) makes a similar call with regard to the conservation of architectural heritage, arguing that ‘For effective implementation of
conservation practice in the East Asian societies, it is necessary to develop conservation principles and methodologies that are more suited to their cultural and local conditions.

One of the very few examples worldwide that is trying to introduce an expressly non-Western system of environmental protection into a threatened conservation area is the Misali Ethics Pilot Project of the Misali Island Conservation Programme, Zanzibar, Tanzania. Misali fishing grounds support more than 10,000 people and, additionally, its reef wall is a renowned scuba-diving location. In the light of the fact that mainstream environmental education was having little or no impact on the illegal fishing practices of local fishermen which were causing irreparable damage to the marine environment, The Islamic Foundation for Ecology and Environmental Sciences (IFEES) is laying down the foundation of Islamic environmental practice in Misali. Appropriate institutions are being established, based on the holistic Sharia code of living, which stresses that in Islam there is no separation from any one aspect of creation and the rest of the natural order (Khalid, 2004). The aim is also to produce an educational guide book to popularise the Islamic approach to environmental protection amongst Muslims as well as inform the international community of the breadth of the Islamic contribution to human welfare (IFEES, 2003).

An associated problem with Western-envisaged ecotourism is that of the inevitable commodification of nature and culture whereby a financial value is attached to natural and cultural resources. As Hinch (2001) suggests, indigenous people have a much deeper connection with the land than non-indigenous people and consequently ‘Because they do not treat land as a possession, they are very wary of treating it as a commodity, even in the purportedly benign context of ecotourism’. The knock-on effect is that, once a financial value has been attached in this way, should ecotourism fail, the expectations that are thus raised might push local populations into other, less sustainable, livelihood options. This indicates the importance of recognising that, where ecotourism is being pursued as a strategy for development, it should take its place alongside a range of livelihood options for the community, rather than superseding these other activities (Scheyvens, 2002: 242).

Furthermore, we are frequently talking of the commodification of natural and cultural resources by outside interests which, not surprisingly, can be viewed as eco-imperialistic or eco-colonialist (Hall, 1994; Mowforth & Munt, 2003) expropriation.

Expropriation of Nature and Culture

The Declaration of The International Forum on Indigenous People held in Oaxaca, Mexico in March 2002 prior to the World Ecotourism Summit in Quebec of IYE 2002 expressed:

profound disagreement with the IYE’s and ecotourism’s most basic assumptions that define Indigenous communities as targets to be developed and our lands as commercial resources to be sold on global markets. Under this universalistic economic framework, tourism brings market competition, appropriates our lands and peoples as consumer products. (Ascanio, 2002)
In Luzon, the Philippines, the Cordillera People’s Alliance (1999: 3) echo this concern, arguing that ‘the Department of Tourism does not own “nature”. Neither does it own the “culture” it so aggressively sells in international and national markets. The Cordillera region and its peoples’ culture are not commodities; they are not for sale’. Pera and McLaren (1999) highlight how ecotourism does not fundamentally alter the logic of capitalist development and that it represents the imposition of a new but familiar development threat on indigenous communities. ‘Behind the rhetoric of sustainability, progress, and conservation lies a fundamental truth: like strip mining, cattle ranching, and other Western economic development strategies, ecotourism defines nature as a product to be bought and sold on the global marketplace’.

There is a call to reaffirm the a priori rights of Indigenous Peoples to their traditional lands, territories and resources and their values (Rao, 2002). The logical extension to this argument is that there is a need to recognise that:

Indigenous Peoples are not mere ‘stakeholders’ but internationally-recognised holders of collective and human rights, including the rights of self-determination, informed consent and effective participation … Indigenous Peoples are not objects of tourism development. We are active subjects with the rights and responsibilities to our (author’s italics) territories and the process of tourism planning, implementation, and evaluation that happen in them. This means we are responsible for defending Indigenous lands and communities from development that is imposed by governments, development agencies, private corporations, NGOs, and specialists. (Ascanio, 2002)

As Pera and McLaren (1999) describe, such development undermines traditional subsistence patterns, agriculture, community integrity and economic self-reliance. Paradoxically, the consumptive orientation, largely sustainable, of indigenous people versus the non-consumptive orientation of ecotourists also throws into sharp focus the fundamentally divergent values and interests between the consumers and targets of ecotourism. As Hinch describes:

Given their traditional lifestyles and values, indigenous peoples are very protective of their right to harvest the resources in their territories … indigenous people have traditionally tended to harvest their resources in a sustainable fashion … In contrast, most ecotourists explicitly seek out non-consumptive activities while traveling … Given these contrasting perspectives, conflict is likely to occur should a group of ecotourists stumble across the harvesting of wildlife while they are visiting an indigenous territory. (Hinch, 2001: 352)

Saarinen (2004: 446) highlights how, given the unequal power relations that are played out, ‘the touristic idea and its representations of wilderness areas as places of aesthetic and scenic value may first contest ideologically and then displace in practical terms the local uses of nature as a resource for traditional livelihoods’.
Conclusions

From the plethora of definitions of ecotourism (Fennell, 2003; Page & Dowling, 2002) it is evident that it is a contested term in terms of operational definitions, subject to varying interpretations that are, however, almost without exception, rooted in western ideology. It is, therefore, at the grass-roots level that contestation should occur. Silvern (cited in Simon, 2001) declares the need to reflect that there is no universal or unique understanding of development or the environment, and to appreciate that each culture articulates and deploys a particular view of nature and how it ought to be used. He points out that any taken-for-granted view of the natural world is the result of complex social interactions between differently empowered social groups. Therefore, if we uncritically accept Western-constructed ecotourism as the be-all-to-end-all, we do so at our, and others’, peril. It follows that ecotourism should be even more fundamentally contested in order to listen to different, distant, distanced, voices. Wearing and McDonald (2002: 201–202) cite Prakash’s call for ‘a radical re-thinking of forms of knowledge and social identities authored and authorized by colonialism and Western domination’ and they argue that, if ecotourism ‘is to succeed in its goal of cultural and environmental integrity, it requires the development of theory that contains that same integrity’.

Of course, it must be recognised that the views expressed in this paper are those of a privileged, western, academic. Blaikie (2000: 1037) questions the right of the author to represent the object of development rather than letting them ‘represent themselves, tell their own authentic stories, and let them be heard above and over the master narrative of the author’. This fundamental challenge remains. The social appropriation of nature must be viewed in, and from, particular social, economic and political contexts. Failure to do so will only result in continued disappointment, frustration and resentment over the manifest shortfall between what ecotourism promises and what it delivers.

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