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Ecotourism, concept and reality. What are perspectives?

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Talking about ecotourism is not easy. Why? Because this word is complex.

This is a scholarly linguistic construction that tries to invent a word solution to meet the challenges of sustainable development.

Eco-tourism is the most complete expression of sustainable tourism. Ecotourism is a good tourism, ethical and eco-citizenship, which aims to limit the human pressure on the environment while contributing to its development.

But I want to criticize this ideal conception of free time and point the limits and ambiguities of its implementation. The aim is to open the debate on the future.

How this new paradigm was born?

Originally, the term of ecotourism is invented in the 80s by biologists who were concerned by environmental degradation caused by the development of tourism practices. The first actions were carried out by militant associative structures for the protection of nature, who organized journey of education for little groups of travelers and local people to respect nature and ecosystem.

Since the 2000s, the World Tourism Organization makes the first campaigns of communication on ecotourism introduced as the new alternative development model capable of implementing sustainable tourism.

From this period, the suffix "eco" plays on the double logic "ecology and economy" to show that it is possible to make "good tourism" and reconcile the imperatives of ecology and economy.

Why such positioning? Because it is impossible to ignore the negative effects of massive tourism and its international impacts. But also that today the tourism industry is an important economic resource for developed societies in where free time become a consumer time.

Why ecotourism ?

to produce a solution against the massive damages of tourism

- high environmental damages on natural resources (water, arable land)
- Impacts on traditional activities (agriculture, fishing)
- Landscapes denatured by an urbanization of leisure
- land and housing pressure
- Weak economic reinvestment on local development

- employments
- Improvement of living standards
- Public infrastructure
- Protected areas



An apparently "smokeless industry" but not without consequences

Source : SV – CRISES 2013

In this diagram, we chose to show how the relationship between benefits and nuisances may appear unbalanced. Adverse effects are weighing heavier in the balance.

And the situation is hardly in developing regions, because there is a lack of control of the activity. In many emerging countries, the relationship between economic impact and pressure on resources used and consumed is even more unbalanced.

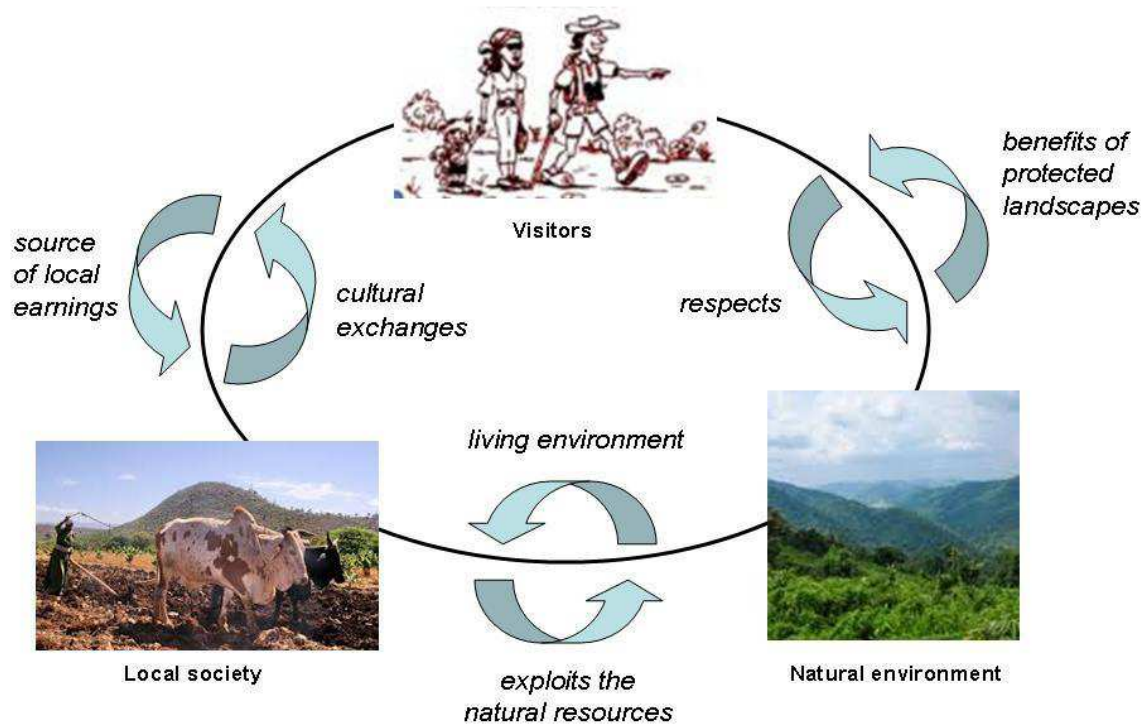
In general, we can say that if the arguments in favor of tourism development are real (employment, development, standard of living), the effects on the environment and societies are so deep that the growth of activity can not compensate for the damage.

To solve this problem and find a balance, it's necessary to reconcile environmental protection and sustainable local development.

How to implement a logical win-win without stopping the tourist machine?

The solution lies in the discourse and theoretical modeling.

Ecotourism, a virtuous cycle



Source : SV – CRISES 2013

Solution lies in a harmonious relationship exchange (good exchange) between two major players (the visitor and resident) and an area of mediation (the natural environment). The visitor respects the natural environment and enjoys the beautiful scenery. The natural environment is preserved and stay as a living resource for the locals. And the exchanges between tourists and local people can allow mutual enrichment, both economically and culturally.

But in practice, things are really different.

First, the tourist is an holiday and leisure consumer seeking to satisfy a need to escape. And ecotourism constitute an offer among others.

Then, the natural environment is not a static space. It is a living and dynamic ecosystem that is changing and evolving. This is not a museum that we visit but a resource space for anyone occupies or exploits.

Finally if local people can be opened to meet and exchange, there is not necessarily interested by development. Note that for traditional societies, live closer to nature is not a desire, but a daily reality.

From these first elements of conceptualization, we can see the difficulties of a truly sustainable tourism.

Yet, in practice, we see an explosion of ecotourism trips in connection with also a strong request growth (around 25 to 30% over the last fifteen years). But the phenomenon is difficult to quantify.

Ecotourism growth trend. The perversion of success

In countries where demand is expressed

- More prestations (green tourism, ecological tourism, communautary tourism, responsible tourism,...)
- Growing of demand for nature, landscape, animals, wild life, cultural immersion
- More operator's tours

In the destinations countries

- More aménagement of original tours and concurrence between destinations
- more regulated areas to facilitate the consumption of natural landscape
- village communities dispossessed of their land and reduced to small business service to tourists

Source : SV – CRISES 2013

What is certain is that the phenomenon exploded. And the success of the application has adverse effects, particularly on the receiving countries, mainly in developing countries which concentrate the great natural areas of the globe.

In addition, there is no trademark "ecotourism", or label or official charter, so any tour operator can claim an "ecotourism" approach for business.

This abundance creates confusion and lack of control opens the door to any abuse.

If massive tourism has its adverse effects, massive ecotourism also creates perverse effects. To attract tourists, countries created protected areas, and do not hesitate to move people to create a "virgin nature" effect. To see that, the Natural Park of Nechisar in southwestern Ethiopia is a good example.

Plan ecotouristic areas



The National Park of Nechisar in South Ethiopia.



Source : SV – CRISES 2013

Created in the middle of the seventies by the military government, local people have been driven from their territory of life sometimes violently. Ethnic conflicts have become common in this region of Rif.

Since 2005, in response to competition from other reserves in Africa, an arsenal of regulations law limited the exploitation of resources (hunting, fishing, and gathering firewood) to accentuate the wild character of the site (Guyot, 2004). To survive, people are forced to accept small jobs service to tourists (guides, crafts, folklore). Today, the park receives more than 20,000 visitors each year.

Nachisar situation is not an isolated case. Since ten years, many parks, reserves and protected areas have been created in the world. Often, the first justification is to promote the dissemination of international tourism from major websites to other areas outside of development.

But the phenomenon also asks the question of demand and the travelers responsibility in the production of these protected areas.

An individual responsibility

DEEPING EXPECTATIONS	SUSTAINABLE CONTRIBUTION	KEEP A PERSONNAL CONFORT
Contact with the wild nature	Contribute to the protection and conservation	Unfrequented areas with hosting services and high quality restoration
Live an authentic experience	Promote a more sustainable life style (simplicity, tranquility)	Preserve its intimacy. Voyager in small group
meet local people	Be useful, help education, improve living conditions, solidarity	Relaxation, well being, take care of his body
discover the customs and traditions	Share experiences, respect the traditions	cultural enrichment
discover local products and gastronomy	Contribute to the local economy	Hygiene, health,

Source : SV – CRISES 2013

Without going into details, we can see on this table that individual motivation for ecotourism can be the result of a trade-off between sometimes conflicting expectations, good intentions and personal needs. The best example is renting a luxury eco-lodge in the jungle.

In front of these abuses, contradictions and perverse effects, the balance of ecotourism may appear nuanced. We can say that this sustainable tourism model has gradually moved away from its original intention. What was originally a militant approach, becoming a fashion? Still, the search for a sustainable balance between societies and their environment is always waiting.

In conclusion, I suggest a perspective through a last example, in France.

The "Oysters road in Charente" seeks to reconcile tourism, environment and human activity. The particularity of this tourism offer is that it is not just a consumer product. This is the result of a project approach, involving public authorities and private economic actors to share and live their territory. And it works well!

Through this example, we can finally ask if ecotourism is the goal. Is it not rather the result of a contractual approach around a project area? Is not the real issue in the search for shared governance? The future is open.

Ecotourism in France :

to obtain contractuel local development



Explain : the oyster farm



Awareness : the natural environment (pond / marsh)

The oyster route in Charente



Valorize : the city of oysters



To taste and sell : an oyster bar



Valorise image and locale identity

Source : SV – CRISES 2013

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