Michelle Sullivan Govani's Commentary on "Ecotourism"

Commentary On
Case: Ecotourism

Ecotourism
There is no one definition of "ecotourism," but the common thread through most definitions is that ecotourism should be nature-based tourism that has both environmental and socio-economic benefits. 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; TIES 2017). With a focus on conservation of the environment, empowerment of the local communities, and interpretation for a greater understanding of nature, TIES paints ecotourism as a win-win-win. Similarly, the World Conservation Union (IUCN) defines ecotourism as: "Environmentally responsible travel to natural areas, in order to enjoy and appreciate nature (and accompanying cultural features, both past and present) that promote conservation, have a low visitor impact, and provide for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local peoples" (Ceballos-Lascuráin 1996, 20). The Nature Conservancy argues that ecotourism should be sensitive to biodiversity as well as appreciating the local cultures. They also highlight that there should be "local participation in decision-making." (The Nature Conservancy 2017).

Although ecotourism, in theory, is a win-win-win for the environment, the local community, and the tourism industry (hoteliers and tourists), there can be situations in which one or more parties are unduly burdened. For example, any kind of tourism to environmentally and culturally sensitive areas can be detrimental when visitors come in large numbers (Stem et al. 2003), leading to increased waste and habitat disturbance. Any benefits (e.g., revenue for protected areas and local communities, education for travelers and locals, etc.) must be weighed against potential negative impacts.

Ecotourism and Ethics

Environmental ethics asks us to reflect on humanity's responsibility toward the environment. What are those responsibilities? How ought we behave toward nature? (Holden 2003). It is appropriate to evaluate ecotourism practices in these terms to see if promises of environmental stewardship and motivations are true in practice. Just as there are competing definitions of ecotourism, there are also competing claims as to what constitutes the most ethical motivations and practices. For example, some environmental ethicists argue that true ecotourism is non-consumptive, and thus non-utilitarian, and eco-centric (nature-centered); they view all organisms as having intrinsic value (Reviewed in Aciksoz et al. 2016; TIES 2015). Others argue that all ecotourism is inherently utilitarian, viewing nature as a commodity to sell accommodations (Stark 2002; Holden 2003). Holden claims that transitions toward ecotourism (such as in the hypothetical Okavango Game Lodge case) are often anthropocentric (human-centered); lodges transition only when they notice that other modes of tourism destroy the environment that draws human visitors in the first place (2003). In Holden's view, a lodge manager is concerned with environmental well-being only so far as it contributes to the health of their eco-tourism business. Finally, what are an eco-lodge's responsibilities to the local community? There are experts who believe that eco-tourism practices must be in harmony with not only the natural environment, but also the human environment (Aciksoz et al. 2016; Mbaiwa 2015; Stark 2002).

Some find it is helpful to frame ecotourism practices as "deep" or "shallow," with the acknowledgement that such classifications are fluid and gradated (Acott et al. 1998). Deep-ecotourism practitioners are guided by a deeply intrinsic value of the natural world. They are ecocentric, and encourage first-hand experiences with nature and culture. Shallow-ecotourism is more utilitarian; a healthy environment is valued as a driver of visitation. Such a framework acknowledges the array of motivations and practices you might find among eco-tourism projects, but the terms "deep" and "shallow" are normative, and thus it would be more neutral so simply use the labels "ecocentric" and "anthropocentric" ecotourism, again with the understanding that the classifications are fluid and gradated.

Ecotourism in the Delta

The Okavango Delta, one of the largest inland deltas in Africa, lies in northwest Botswana, a sparsely populated country in southern Africa with just over 2.2 million residents across a territory the size of France (CIA 2017). This UNESCO World

Heritage Site floods during the dry season, transforming the brown, arid landscape into a lush, nutrient-rich oasis, providing water for countless animals and plants during the arid winters (UNESCO 2017). This wetland system is largely untouched by human development, with restrictions on permanent settlements.

In the last two decades, the national government in Botswana has become dedicated to ensuring that the massive tourism industry has a small footprint on the delta it depends on (Botswana Tourism Organisation 2013). Note that such motivations for a national ecotourism program are indicative of anthropocentric ecotourism; the government has a utilitarian value of nature as being crucial to maintaining levels of tourism. (This makes sense, as travel and tourism contributed to 8.5% of the nation's GDP in 2014 with projected increases around 5% per year through 2025 (World Travel and Tourism Council 2015).) However, such values and motivations may not be replicated on the local scale.

In 2002, as part of the Botswana National Ecotourism Strategy, the national government launched an Ecotourism Certification System, "designed to encourage and support responsible environmental, social, and cultural behavior by tourism businesses and make sure they provide a quality, eco-friendly product to consumers." According to this certification system, ecotourism must be sensitive to natural and cultural heritage with opportunities for biodiversity conservation and economic development. Thus, development initiatives for local communities are required to be integrated at the outset of all certified ecotourism projects (Stevens and Jansen 2002). Through this program, lodges and hotels are expected to minimize negative impacts on their social, cultural, and environmental surroundings, ensure equitable distribution of benefits to their host communities, invest part of their revenue in conservation, provide educational programming for guests and locals, and provide a "quality" experience to guests.

Case Overview

In this case, each character experiences some of the benefits; we will explore later whether those benefits are distributed fairly. In short, we see that Nuru and the Hambukushu community are benefitting from an influx of revenue that contribute to new infrastructure, job opportunities, and tourist patrons of shops and restaurants. Nuru is employed by the craft market and has also applied for a position as a safari guide and wildlife educator. Rachel feels fulfilled in carrying out her personal conservation mission by changing practices and programming at the lodge. She also knows that certification with the national government will bring more guests and

more revenue to support her initiatives. Mahendra has options; if he values cultural, social, and environmental sustainability he can choose an eco-lodge that fits that ethic. And he may also benefit through enhanced research opportunities with the lodge due to proximity to his field sites. Finally, the delta environment is likely to benefit from more sustainable tourism practices that can protect the area from waste, pollution, and unsustainable uses of resources. While each character and the environment derive some benefit, there are also tradeoffs and tensions.

Nuru

According to the definitions of ecotourism above, one component of a successful ecotourism venture is that it is economically beneficial (such as providing income and employment opportunities) to the local community. And more broadly, biodiversity is often defended as a resource of food and income for the world's poorest people (Gilbert et al. 2010). However, a review of several studies presented at a meeting of the Zoological Society of London in 2010, found that evidence linking conservation projects (including ecotourism ventures) with poverty alleviation is only anecdotal. Those locals who do benefit are most often the affluent members of the community (Gilbert et al. 2010).

For example, in a case study in Wolong Nature Reserve, China, He et al. (2008) found there was significant inequality among rural stakeholders; those who were closer to roads and further from the reservation reaped the benefits both of direct tourism and indirect infrastructure improvements. Also, He et al. found that the nonpermanent souvenir shops are run by the less affluent locals, while the year-round permanent shops were run by community elites. And when rural residents are employed, it is often in low-skill, low-wage jobs (cleaners, waiters, cooks) (He et al. 2008; Lenao and Basupi 2016).

J. E. Mbaiwa, an expert on and scholar of ecotourism in Botswana, found that across the last 30 years, ecotourism ventures in Botswana have often been successful, but only when certain socio-economic and political dynamics are at play (Mbaiwa 2015). Specifically, villages tend to benefit most when an active and fair Community Trust implements ecotourism projects in the community (Mbaiwa 2015). Community Trusts are government prerequisites for any ecotourism projects in Botswana; they are registered legal entities comprised of adults who have lived in the village for more than five years.

In Nuru's village the Board of Trustees are affluent, male members of the society. Many of them own large parcels of land close to main roads and the village center. Thus, the distribution of revenue and other indirect benefits like infrastructure improvements may be skewed toward such members of society. In addition, jobs and entrepreneurial opportunities are most available to those members of Nuru's village who are already trained to take such positions or who have the land and facilities necessary to start a restaurant or shop. While a job at the Craft Market provides nice supplemental income, Nuru will find that her business is sensitive to seasonality (the delta is most popular May through December). A job at the lodge could provide better security and income, as well as opportunities for upward mobility into management positions.

To improve the distribution of benefits to rural, less affluent members of her village, perhaps Nuru should run to be elected to the trust. Her voice could represent those with similar struggles. In addition, the lodge could help by initiating a training program to build foreign language, hospitality, and entrepreneurial skills. A real-life example, the Chobe Game Lodge located in Botswana's Chobe National Park implemented the first female safari guide training program in an effort to provide more equitable job opportunities (Wilson 2014). It is worth noting that in Botswana, societies are traditionally patriarchal, and women tend to be excluded from some opportunities (Lenao and Basupi 2016; Jones 2005). However, the country has started to pass legislation aimed toward removing or counteracting prior discrimination (Lenau and Basupi 2016). Still, initiatives to improve opportunities for women should be done in a way that will not be construed as imposing western gender norms.

Rachel

Given Rachel's background as a biologist, CI employee, and her new focus on making Okavankgo Game Lodge a sustainable eco-lodge, it is highly possible that she holds an ecocentric ethic. She accepted the manager position to reduce the negative impacts of the lodge on the environment, not because the lodge depends on the environment for business (though it does), but because she has seen in her prior career the damage lodges' can cause to the environment and animals she has harbored a life-long passion for. This ethic stands in contrast to the utilitarian view of ecotourism held by the national government and certification program.

Rachel's passion for the environment drives her to seek foreign investments that will initiate and maintain several sustainability measures at the lodge, but such investors

will request that revenue be shared. Her ethical viewpoint and passion may lead her to accept the compromise, meaning she may be blind to the potential damage such agreements could do to the local economy. Thus, in one sense, accepting foreign investments could suit her ecocentric ethic, but to others with a more anthropocentric leaning worldview, Rachel could be entering an unethical deal. For example, according to our definitions of ecotourism above, "ecotourism ventures should only be considered 'successful' if local communities have some measure of control over them and if they share equitably in the benefits emerging from ecotourism activities" (Scheyvens 1999). But it is also possible that Rachel could justify her foreign investments in terms of benefits to the local community. Increased investments could lead to better facilities that attract more guests and thus more revenue. Rachel could grant control over revenue, and related investments, to the local Community Trust.

In addition, Rachel's focus on western standards of scientific expertise may make her more likely to hire her CI colleagues as opposed to Nuru, because she knows she can trust her old friends to espouse and practice her same ecocentric worldview. And logistically, her CI colleagues would require less training; most speak many foreign languages, are experienced in education, and all have expertise in ecology and conservation. She might also realize, however, that she could balance the hiring process by hiring one or two of her CI colleagues to then train several local hires, including Nuru.

Is it possible to be ecocentric and still be concerned about the local community? Ethical worldviews come in gradients. Rachel may realize that she can still achieve her goals without foreign investments, albeit more slowly. First, in a conversation with the Community Trust, she might find that many of her raw materials and food can be sourced locally, meaning lower costs, a boost to the local economy, and a more authentic culinary experience for guests. She could also take advantage of the tax incentives for sourcing and employing locally -- a budget saver.

And perhaps her ecocentric ethic means she hopes the she can inspire both guests and locals to have a better appreciation for nature. One way to get the local community excited about her projects, is to involve them. She could have them arrange a cultural education program to supplement environmental education (Stem et al. 2003). She might also initiate a training program to build entrepreneurial skills in the community, because although direct employment with ecotourism has been found unlikely to influence conservation perspectives, indirect benefits such as

education opportunities and infrastructural improvements can have a positive influence on conservation perspectives (Stem et al 2003). Plus, Rachel would be building the capacity of the local community to participate in the educational and tourism market. In other words, she would be contributing to their economic empowerment (venues for regular income), psychological well-being (potential for building optimistic futures), social empowerment (keeping revenue local to contribute to community groups, health clinics, etc.) and political empowerment (allowing community voices to guide development) (Scheyvens 1999).

Mahendra

Where Mahendra decides to stay will depend on his world view, as well as how he weighs that against logistical concerns. If Mahendra is a strong ecocentric, he will certainly want to support the Okavango Game Lodge as the only ecotourism option. However, if he does not have a strong ecocentric ethic he may be more concerned with either (a) saving money or (b) keeping his family comfortable, in which case we would stay at the Sanctuary Inn or the Royal Safari Camp respectively. The Okavango Game Lodge does get logistical bonus points for being conveniently close to his field site. Also, depending on Mahendra's awareness of and concern for local and indigenous communities, he might be either pleased that the lodge sponsors a Craft Market or disappointed by the Craft Market as the lodge's only (current) meager attempt at community engagement and support.

Considering that Mahendra knows of Rachel's background as a fellow elephant biologist, Mahendra might consider reaching out to her to initiate a community science program. Perhaps he could become a regular patron of the Okavango Game Lodge, implementing a training and employment program for locals and lodge guests who are interested in partaking in elephant research. This would be considered "research ecotourism," providing research opportunities for visitors and locals that focus on the delta region's biology (in this case, specific to elephant biology) (Clifton and Benson 2006). Additionally, employing community members to help with "mapping, measuring, and monitoring" could increase local capacity to self-employ or seek employment as safari guides, wildlife educators, or ecologists. This could also be seen as part of a broader call to increase biodiversity knowledge and knowledge acquisition skills in developing countries (Vanhove et al. 2017).

Conclusion

The Botswana government's "Ecotourism" certification level is defined as follows:

> **Ecotourism:** *This level upholds the principles of ecotourism, as stated in the Botswana National Ecotourism Strategy (2002) and defines those facilities that have met all the principles of ecotourism. The level reflects the facilities' commitment to and involvement with local communities in tourism development, nature conservation, environmental management and interpretation of the surrounding environment to the guests.*
> (Botswana Tourism Organisation 2013b)

In this case, there are trade-offs between affording new sustainability measures vs. achieving developmental goals, particularly if Rachel's ecocentric ethic drives her to compromise with foreign investors and leads her to hire only her CI colleagues. However, if Rachel wishes to achieve the final "Ecotourism" certification level, she will need to balance her goals with community engagement and development. So "success" in this case is a balancing act for the lodge and the community.

It is worth noting that "success" depends on your environmental ethic. Those who tend toward anthropocentric will want to see environmental goals balanced with developmental goals. Someone who is strongly ecocentric, like Rachel, might be willing to compromise developmental goals in order to move more quickly with sustainability and environmental initiatives. It's also worth noting that community involvement with ecotourism doesn't necessarily change the terms in which locals see the forest so much as it keeps them too busy with new jobs to conduct old, potentially "harmful" activities, such as converting protected land to agriculture (e.g., Stem et al. 2003). Should ecotourism project managers like Rachel be satisfied to simply keep people preoccupied? Then, questions remain: If people had time, would they hunt? It tourism levels dropped, would the forest lose its value? So perhaps Rachel should push for "loftier goals," such as a greater respect for nature or a shared ecocentric ethic. But how could she go about achieving that? And what does it mean to respect nature? There are different interpretations, and utilitarian values don't necessarily equate with "disrespect."

Rachel needs to develop a greater understanding of the community's own environmental ethic before she decides to impose her own. A good practice would be to offer involvement and training with the eco-lodge wherever she can, especially to underrepresented members of the local community. Most importantly, balancing community development needs, local traditions and values, and sustainable development, is not amenable to one-off solutions; rather it requires careful and continuous attention.