

Nature-Based Tourism as Education for Sustainability: Possibilities, Limitations, Contradictions

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A B S T R A C T

In what sense might nature based tourism be considered education for sustainability? "Educational" confers an implied worthiness which may seem to offset the environmental costs of tourism. Moreover, nature-based tourism may indeed have an important educational role to play. This paper examines the role of "education" in ecotourism discourse, and argues that a predominance in ecotourism of an overly simplified set of educational concepts. These fail to convince that "educational" nature based tourism provides a significant contribution to education for sustainability, and equally fail to establish the necessity for tourism as a means to those educational ends which are achieved. The paper concludes with a discussion of some of the considerations which a more serious consideration of nature based tourism as education would have to take into account.

In what sense might nature based tourism be considered education for sustainability? Within the contested terrain of sustainable development, 'travel less, holiday closer to home' (Gatersleben & Vlek 1998) would be an uncontroversial inclusion in most prescriptions. Within the lexicon of sustainability, 'tourism' seems a good candidate for inclusion in the category 'things consumers will have to do without, or do much less of'. In this broader context, a focus on 'sustainable tourism' seems to beg the question of sustainability.

At the level of the consumer, sustainable tourism may be seen as part of a larger pattern of what Luke (1993, p. 170) calls 'green consumerism ... which ... revalorizes the basic premises of material consumption and massive waste ... providing the symbolic and substantive means to rationalize resource use and cloak consumerism in the appearance of ecological activism ...'. At the level of tourism development, the notion of sustainable tourism seems to function as a trope, deflecting critical observations of tourism practice away from the conclusion that tourism may be inherently antithetical to sustainable development, and towards the milder observation that tourism is not sustainable yet (cf McKercher 1993, Wheeler 1993). These observations are unsurprising corollaries of more general criticisms of how the meaning of sustainable development is transformed in different contexts (see, for example Beder 1993).

The importance of the question of tourism as a kind of education for sustainability is amplified by such doubts about the place of tourism in sustainable development. Could environmentally detrimental aspects of nature-based tourism be offset by indirect contributions to sustainable development, through education? Direct environmental costs of (some) nature based tourism may be justifiable, if it could be argued that nature tourism offered educational experiences which were both unique and necessary. While it is possible to conceive of tourism in such terms, I argue that the existing notions of 'education' which circulate in nature tourism are unequal to such a project, and that a more careful and robust consideration of tourism as education is required.

Education and the ecotourism debate

The idea that travel broadens the mind has been a central, disputed, theme of tourism discourse since the beginning of mass tourism in the nineteenth century, reflecting, in part, earlier ideals of (and reservations about) the Grand Tour of Europe. Buzard (1993 p. 109) quotes Lassell's 17th century recommendation: 'no man understands Livy and Caesar ... like him who hath made exactly the *Grand Tour* of France ...'. This sentiment persisted, as did its opposite. Johnson told Boswell 'time might be employed to more advantage from nineteen to twenty-four almost in any way than travelling' (cited in Buzard 1993, p. 99) and Cowper quipped: 'How much a dunce, that has been sent to roam, Excels a dunce, that has been kept at home.' (ibid).

Tensions about the educative value of cultural tourism were one thread of a broader anti-tourism rhetoric in late 19th century Britain, in which images of uncultured masses on packaged tours were contrasted with an idealised 'authentic' traveller. With the rise of environmentalism in the last three decades of the 20th century, the high ground of 'authentic traveller' versus 'mere tourist' debates has expanded to accommodate environmental as well as cultural concerns. The 'eco' prefix appears to have driven an explosion of tourism marketing initiatives, while at the same time feeding proliferating critical discussion in the academic literature. However, debate about ecotourism has focussed mainly on its direct environmental and economic implications, rather than on the educational claims which routinely appear in ecotourism rhetoric.

The standard pro-ecotourism argument is economic rather than educational; ecotourism is claimed to deliver economic incentives (or imperatives) for (local) nature conservation. Boo's (1990) frequently-cited study makes this claim, lightly qualified, while quarantining consideration of sustainability issues to National Parks and other protected areas (the negative impacts of air travel, for example, are not considered).

Criticisms of economic rationalist approaches to conservation through tourism have been well rehearsed. (1) Tourism may

fail to reliably deliver the needed economic incentive. Craik (1991) points out that tourism income can fluctuate or collapse, for many reasons including changing fashion, exchange rates, social unrest, crime, and so on, or because of tourism consequences such as inflation, social or cultural disruption and external costs. (2) Political, social, and economic structures may not be perfectly rational, or may function imperfectly, and thus can fail to deliver the protection to natural areas necessary to sustain tourism in those regions. Boo's (1990) recommendations for government and administration might be read as a list of all that has to go right for ecotourism to deliver nature conservation. (3) Environmental politics, according to Hajer (1995) necessarily involves simplification and persuasion, rather than entirely rational calculation. Environmental decision making proceeds with knowledge which is partial, may be indeterminate, and which is at the same time too copious for any individual to comprehend. Furthermore, it may be decided that loss of wildlife is inevitable, or worth sacrificing for other benefits (such as a large resort); rationality does not lead inevitably to conservation. (4) Rationalism (not rationality) may itself be one of several broad cultural tendencies which contribute to an 'environmental crisis'. For example Bowers (1993) has argued that excessive faith in human reason leads to flawed understandings of human environment relationships, through failing to account for the cultural dimensions of human dreams, desires and beliefs (or not recognising dreams, desires and beliefs at all) and by privileging a world view based on individualism, faith in progress and technology, and anthropocentrism.

Even where successful local conservation is achieved temporarily through ecotourism, the wisdom of linking conservation outcomes to the success or failure of competing ecotourism ventures, in perpetuity, is moot. Of course, a similar point applies to education for sustainability through tourism; such a project would have to be developed so as not to leave educational outcomes entirely dependant on the success or failure of particular tourism ventures.

Concepts of education

One of the difficulties in attempting to dissect 'education' from ecotourism discourse is that 'education' means many things. Prior to elaborating on these differences, I want to position myself more clearly on the question of meaning and definition.

While little attention has been paid in the ecotourism discourse to what is meant by education, the same cannot be said for 'ecotourism'. Definition-seeking has become almost a field in itself, with all of the cross-referencing, circularity, and normative struggles this implies. Examples from the recent academic literature alone include: 'Ecotourism: the search for an operational definition' (Blamey 1997); 'Ecotourism: towards a key elements approach to operationalising the concept' (Bottril & Pearce 1995); 'Defining Canadian ecotourists'; 'Ecotourism and nature conservation: a definition with some recent developments in Micronesia' (Valentine

1991). In papers and publications not specifically devoted to the question of definition, an introductory discussion of definitions has become almost standard (eg Nelson 1994). These discussions are framed, and limited, by what linguist George Lakoff calls classical categorisation theory.

According to classical theory (in both formal linguistics and folk theory), categories are understood as containers in which things are placed or excluded according to sets of shared properties (Lakoff 1987). However empirical studies of categorisation reveal that few categories fit the classical definition. Lakoff (1987) argues classical theory of categorisation, by failing to account for more common categorisation forms, fundamentally misunderstands human reason and cognition. Categories are better understood as defined by central prototypes, rather than boundary conditions. Things may be good or weak examples of a category. Categories may be structured as clusters, and may have fuzzy or graded boundaries. Clusters may be chains, radial, or more complex. Furthermore, categorisation is demonstrably an artefact of human neurophysiology, embodiment, capacities for mental imagery, perception, and culture; in other words, categorisation is influenced by, or reflects in some way, the experiences of those doing the categorising, rather than just the things categorised. (Lakoff, 1987).

'contradictions and ambiguities are pointers to the essentially discursive nature of environmental politics'

Difficulties in pinning down 'ecotourism' may therefore be seen not as a problem or anomaly, but as a signal to pay attention to how particular meanings arise, and in what contexts. Recent work in cultural studies, in which multiple meanings of signs or texts (polysemy) is taken as central to understanding how meaning is made, communicated, and transformed, is helpful here. Hall (1993) argues (particularly in relation to television programs) that polysemous signs are neither pluralistic nor strictly determined. Preferred or dominant meanings may be reproduced, transformed, or contested — within limits — at key moments in production, circulation, use and reproduction. The process whereby ecotourism is encoded (as ecotourism meaning one thing) and decoded (as ecotourism meaning, or perhaps implying, another) throws some light on struggles to appropriate ecotourism to serve different, sometimes contradictory interests. Ecotourism is associated with a constellation of difficult, complex terms: 'sustainable development', 'place', 'nature' (the most complex word in the English language, according to Raymond Williams (1983); Cartmill (1993), citing Lovejoy suggests nature has 66 distinct meanings), 'culture' (the second or third most complex Williams (1983), and 'environment'. Perhaps the real puzzle would be if 'ecotourism' did signify a set of practices with clear, consistent

and unique characteristics.

For Hajer (1995), contradictions and ambiguities are pointers to the essentially discursive nature of environmental politics. He criticises a predominance in the environmental literature of a (largely futile) quest for consistent paradigms and deeply held internal beliefs. It is precisely the adaptability of the ecotourism story line to divergent, often contradictory purposes which suggests its discursive function – as a site for contestation. Whose interests and what epistemological commitments are at play in struggles to appropriate and transform the ecotourism storyline, and how is the question of education bound up in this?

Tourism as education

Education is not always explicitly included in ecotourism definitions. For example, of 17 definitions of ecotourism recorded in a survey of all states and provinces in the USA and Canada (Edwards, McLaughlin, & Ham, 1998), several make no mention of education or related terms. But tourism and education are overlapping categories; 'tourism' itself may be taken to mean 'education' in some contexts. It is no accident that a search by title in a library catalogue using terms like 'discovery' 'adventure' or 'exploring' will come up with titles such as 'Discovering mathematics', 'Adventures in science' or 'Exploring Unix' (these examples are apocryphal). The Latin *educere* 'to lead forth' is closely related to *educare* 'to bring up children' (Williams 1983), the latter being the root of 'educate'.

Tourism and education share common metaphors. To 'see' is the dominant western metaphor for 'to understand'. In some contexts, travel experience and knowledge are synonymous ('yes I know China - I lived there for three months in 1993'). At the same time, tourism has connotations which position it as education's opposite. Tourism is associated with the end of schooling (travel as something done after finishing university) or holiday breaks. In a further twist, travel in the tradition of the Grand Tour can be said to *present* the reality which formal education can only *represent* - tourism thus is *education*, while formal education is mere *schooling*.

The extent to which such folk perceptions infiltrate tourism discourse is something to be determined, as is the extent to which they can be taken at face value. But the point remains that identifying the role of education in tourism discourse is complicated by the possibility that tourism may have educational connotations which remain unstated, and more importantly, that 'education' and 'tourism' are neither clearly bounded nor neatly overlapping, but are engaged in a shifting and sometimes contradictory dialectic.

In tourism practice there is no clear line between tourism and education either. (In his handbook for park interpreters, Lewis (1989), for example, suggests that a visitor asking for the location of a hot dog stand might be invited to discuss historical food preferences by an interpreter). While defining images of tourism and education (adults relaxing on a beach/children completing book work in a classroom) are clearly different,

in the case of school tours, outdoor education, educational field trips, academic conferences, study tours, study abroad programs, overseas conservation volunteer programs, student and staff exchanges and scientific expeditions, tourism and education overlap. Interpretation centres, zoos and museums, similarly, offer something ambiguously between classroom representations of nature and direct experience. Tourism guides instruct (educate?) tourists in language, culture, skiing skills and so on.

'Education and tourism rarely intersect in academic discourse'

Education and tourism rarely intersect in academic discourse. Tribe (1997) recognises the problem of constructing university tourism studies as a *curriculum* problem. He cites Jafari's (Tribe 1997, p. 648) model of tourism studies' relationship to the disciplines, which has education as relevant to tourism education, but not to tourism as such. Drawing on curriculum literature from the 1960's and 70's he structures an argument on concepts which have been problematised by two decades of further curriculum discourse and practice. He neglects to attend to the constructedness of disciplinary knowledge, and to the contingency of forms of curriculum organisation on social, cultural and political factors.

Education barely rates a mention in Dann's (1996) extensive review of tourism theory; education is implied in some discussions of tourism as 'seeing', 'discovering' or 'exploring', and some comparisons with schooling are drawn in his discussion of tour guiding (here again is the problem that 'education' may be meant when nothing is stated). While there are exceptions (Russell 1994, Leslie 1998), the general observation that tourism and educational theory rarely intersect applies also to the specific case of ecotourism, in spite of the prominence of education in ecotourism definitions.

The complex and unreflexive relationship between education and ecotourism places 'education' at a key node in discursive struggles over sustainability and ecotourism. The capacity of 'education' to denote something quite narrow, such as passing on information, while connoting something more profound, provides camouflage for contradictions between ecotourism practice and sustainability, and also provides a means whereby contradictions can be resolved in favour of particular interests, often meaning business as usual. The following discussion focusses on some of these 'business as usual' aspects of nature tourism, rather than on special purpose educational travel (cf Hall, Springett & Springett 1993, Kalinowski & Weiler 1992).

Recurrent educational themes in ecotourism discourse

The most developed educational theme in environmental tourism discourse is national park interpretation and derivative forms of environmental education. A defining image here is

the United States National Parks Service ranger, stimulating interest and translating information and experience into digestible knowledge. The object of the ranger's attention is a member of a vaguely defined general public, part enigmatic stranger (by virtue of their status as visitors or tourists), part predictably behaving stereotype. For park interpreters, 'interpretation' means primarily 'translation' and 'communication' (Lewis 1989, Tilden 1977) (see also Cohen 1985); communication is understood as a neutral conduit (cf Bowers & Flinders 1990). Epistemologically, park interpretation sees nature understood by experts (usually scientists) whose knowledge is translated into terms the person in the street can relate to. Ontologically, park interpretation sees nature as unproblematically real and preserved exemplarily in national parks, where it can be experienced or viewed directly.

The term interpretation was adopted by the Parks Service in the late 1930's (Brockman 1978), apparently in a deliberate attempt to disassociate environmental education for the public in national parks from perceived negative aspects of formal schooling (Everhart 1983). Bryant (1932), mentions interpretation, but only in the context of education, not as an alternative term. Tilden (1977, pp. 32-3), in what has been regarded as a standard work on park interpretation since its first appearance in 1957, contrasts a straw version of

institutional education with the interest and stimulation provided by park interpretation:

Instruction takes place where the primary purpose of the message between teacher and pupil is education. The classroom is the outstanding example of this ... [i]n the field of Interpretation ... the activity is not instruction so much as what we may call provocation ... the purpose of interpretation is to stimulate the reader or hearer towards a desire to widen his horizon of interests and knowledge, and to gain an understanding of the greater truths that lie behind any statement of fact.

The claim that interpretation is not 'education' is something of an exception, and contemporary interpretation is not always positioned rhetorically against supposed dry and uninteresting schooling (and in any case might more reasonably be compared to nature documentaries or computer simulations). Far more commonly, interpretation is implied to be a kind of education, albeit simply conceived and conducted on limited terms. Farrell (1999, p.19), for example, defines interpretation as: 'a communication process, which aims to translate ideas and customs into terms an audience can understand. Interpretation should stimulate (rather than satisfy) curiosity and, most importantly should encourage visitors to internalise

Table 1. References to education in ecotourism definitions

Reference to education (Edwards <i>et al.</i> 1998)	Page (Region) (first appearance only)
'purposeful travel that creates an understanding of cultural and natural history ... with a high level of interpretation'	p. 28 (Canada)
'enlightening nature-based or cultural travel experience ... [with] the requirement that ... some degree of purposeful environmental or cultural education be present within the ecotourism experience'	p. 30 (Manitoba)
'Nature tourism ... travel to a specific area to experience and learn about the natural environment of the area ... not including... purely recreational adventure ... [or] consumptive activities like hunting and fishing'.	p. 38 (Nova Scotia)
'Nature tourism products meet two objectives: Experience ... Education - something to learn (ie. to increase one's knowledge, understanding, and appreciation of the natural environment).	p. 40 (Ontario)
'[ecotourism needs] access ... to obtain educational and scientific information of good quality ...' [mentions activities and observation]	p. 44 (L'ecotourisme et le Développement Durable)
'ecotourism attempts to reintegrate the traveller into the bosom of nature and ecosystems'	
'has to do with appreciating nature and environment and how it uniquely relates to Alabama'	p. 50 (Alabama)
marketing plan refers to 'Eco-Education Itinerary'	p. 54 Arizona
'promotes environmental conservation'	p. 56 Arkansas
'... an enlightening, nature-oriented travel experience ...'	p. 58 California
'travel to natural areas which ... [provides] a quality experience that connects the visitor to nature'	p.66 Florida
'... nature-based travel to Hawaii's natural attractions to experience and study Hawaii's unique flora, fauna, and culture ... infused with the spirit of aloha aina (love of the land)'	p. 70 Hawaii
'Three types of experience fall under the general heading of ecotourism ... viewing ... [especially] endangered and unusual species ...; ... experience the physical challenges [of nature] ...; ...accompany a guide or expert to learn about nature and the outdoors (a learning experience).'	Montana p. 100
'Ecotourism is ... authentic, intimate, meaningful, and educational encounters between visitors and local natural and cultural phenomena... '	Oregon p. 122
'... ecotourism.. provides first hand, participatory experiences ... has an element of education ... promotes environmental responsibility'	p. 142 Utah

the message and revise their attitudes and behaviour accordingly'.

Farrell's (1999) inclusion of behavioural objectives (less apparent in the earliest definitions of park interpretation) reflects views of education which reached their zenith in mainstream educational discourse in the early 1960's (Stenhouse 1975). These too have become routine; on their return to the everyday, tourists are supposed to 'do something' such as recycle their garbage or become environmental activists (eg Leslie 1998). The preferred outcomes are often minor, if not trivial; conforming to park regulations (care with fire, sticking to marked trails and so forth) or simple environmental action (such as preventing pets from roaming (Farrell, 1999) or persuading tourists not to touch dolphins while feeding them (Orams & Hill 1998). The role of interpretation in garnering support for the sponsoring organisation and its practices is a notable exception (cf Foresta 1984).

Educational images or metaphors are consistently used to help clarify ecotourism definitions; 'education', by implication, is not seen as problematic. Table (i) illustrates some of the constellation of usages of 'education' in ecotourism definitions. It can be seen that ecotourism creates understanding of natural history; enlightens; involves experience and learning; increases knowledge, understanding, and appreciation of nature; provides access to information; integrates into the bosom of nature; involves appreciation, connects to nature, and so on (Edwards *et al.* 1998).

These, of course, are everyday terms invoking common metaphors for education, and no doubt help clarify what is meant by 'ecotourism', to a degree. While the term education itself may imply a constellation of possible meanings (potentially confusing rather than clarifying the ecotourism picture), the overall pattern in which: practices are defined as education; metaphors are invoked; and terms such as learning, enlightenment, and communication are used interchangeably, suggests a predominance in ecotourism of an overly simplified set of educational concepts. These fail to convince that 'educational' nature based tourism provides a significant contribution to education for sustainability, and equally fail to establish the necessity for tourism as a means to those educational ends which are achieved.

Education and sustainable development

To take seriously the possibility that nature based tourism could make an important contribution to education for sustainability requires a critique of aphoristic notions of education in tourism discourse, and attention to important omissions. What follows is intended as a first step in that direction.

(1) Social, cultural, and political dimensions of educational aims and goal settings.

Individualism dominates the construction of education in ecotourism. The tourist is a consumer of knowledge,

vulnerable to persuasion but ultimately free to pick and choose. Tourism lacks a conception of education as a public good, and of the educated democratic citizenry central to much education discourse (for example Marginson 1993); it is therefore difficult to find purchase for discussions about the social, economic, or political implications of how tourism experiences (and knowledge derived from tourism) are distributed. Yet sustainable development is inherently political (Hajer 1995); who decides what understandings and realities will dominate in ecotourism offerings, and by what process? The point here is not so much that these questions are not answered in practice - ecotourism happens, so something has been decided - but that education discourse in ecotourism lacks a place for the depth of reflexivity demanded by these considerations, and is therefore inherently conservative. Ryan (1998, p. 192) comments: 'tourists do learn through the modes of play offered by contemporary tourism. They learn the signs of modern tourism'.

'Tourism lacks a conception of education as a public good'

While tourism discourse is attentive to social, cultural, and political dimensions of tourism, the role of tourism in educating populations (of tourists) with a view to (possibly) radical social, cultural, or political transformation receives superficial acknowledgment at best. There are important differences here between local tourism, intranational tourism, and international tourism. The latter may be a particularly hard case; exactly what environmental educational problems (and according to whose definitions) would require international travel by particular groups?

(2) Epistemological and ontological dimensions of experience

According to Lundgren (1983) the representation problem is a (he says 'the') central curriculum problem. By this he refers to the reproduction, through systematic education, of knowledge produced elsewhere. Notwithstanding the evident ontological dimensions of schooling, education is centrally engaged with a literate epistemology, in which knowledge can be taken out of context, disembodied in some cases, and re-embedded. This almost self-evident observation appears, not surprisingly, to underlie a widespread understanding of education in ecotourism. Knowledge is something which can be passed on to the tourist by the interpreter. But once knowledge has been processed and represented, what is the role of 'direct' experience? If equivalent knowledge or sense of reality could be obtained by watching a film, for example, then ecotourism becomes educationally redundant; the particular form of experience is substitutable, and the location, in many cases, is arbitrary ('nature' and 'the environment' are universal).

Epistemological tension between tourism experiences as temporary, local, and embodied, and tourist knowledge as something abstracted from experience, is matched by ontological tension. Tourism experiences are partly defined by difference, or escape from everyday reality (Cohen & Taylor 1992). In so far as nature tourists do develop embodied, perhaps tacit knowledge of the natural worlds encountered, what is the relevance of such performative knowledge once tourists have gone home? At a community level, what patterns of experience, particularly within a bioregion, might be important? Tourism discourse generally is unhelpful on this point; while attention to the constructedness of tourism experiences is routine (Harkin 1995, Urry 1990), there is little detailed attention to the role of physical encounters with nature.

The term 'interpretation' contains a neglected clue to how such an inquiry might proceed - interpretation can mean 'performance' as well as translation. Indeed, knowledge considered as 'performative grasp of the world' (Rouse, 1987, p.63) is suggested in the quote from John Muir often cited in park interpretation literature:

I'll interpret the rocks, learn the language of the flood, storm and avalanche. I'll acquaint myself with the glaciers and wild gardens, and get as near the heart of the world as I can' (cited in Everhart 1983, p. 51).

There may be reasons to take seriously the ways in which particular communities relate experientially to nature, particularly within their respective bioregions, or geographic areas which they control politically (Brookes 1998). The dialectics between the reality of tourist experiences and 'paramount' reality (Cohen & Taylor 1992), and between representational knowledge and embodied, performative knowledge are central to understanding educational possibilities. Such possibilities are undoubtedly fewer in tourism based on the temporary visitor who 'takes away' knowledge from a one-off experience than in tourism which constructs on-going, if episodic relationships with particular places.

Some of the epistemological and ontological groundwork for developing and evaluating outdoor experience in these terms can be found in environmental education theory derived from the aboriginal concept of singing the world into existence (Brookes 1998, Gough 1991).

(3) *Social and cultural construction of knowledge*

Tourism experiences and the social and cultural settings from which tourists come and to which they return are mutually constitutive. Nature experiences are shaped and constrained by social and cultural influences, but at the same time, collective experience of nature becomes encoded in common beliefs, understandings, and social arrangements (such as sustainable development codes). Deconstructing the

distinction between knowledge production and reproduction in (2), likewise emphasises a role for tourism experiences in constructing, rather than just reproducing, knowledge and shared senses of reality.

These observations underline the inadequacy of individualism and behaviourism, so prominent in environmental interpretation discourse, as a basis for a theory of education in nature tourism (Bowers 1993). Individualism fails to account for the intertextual (Gough 1993) nature of meaning-making; the terms under which individuals negotiate the meaning of experiences are neither free, nor arbitrary. At the same time, behaviourism fails to account both for the extent to which meaningfulness is embedded in contexts and experience, and for the extent to which it is negotiated individually. As Hall (1993) has observed, cultural patterns dominate but do not determine how cultural productions (such as a tourist experience) are understood.

Alternative accounts are available in the curriculum and environmental education literature. Bowers and Flinders (1990), for example, contribute insights into how particular social and cultural influences are manifest in language, use of space, and non-verbal communication. Gough (1993) has elaborated on the intertextual nature of meaning-making. Bowers (1993), provides an analysis of how particular cultural pre-dispositions, which he argues are implicated in the environmental crisis (rationalism, anthropocentrism, the idea of progress, and individualism) can form a hidden curriculum in educational materials, programs and settings. While there is little reason to suppose ecotourism practice could not in principle be refined to reflect these more complex accounts of educational practice, to do so would disrupt, and contradict, dominant understandings of education in ecotourism discourse.

Concluding remarks

Ecotourism discourse is sustained, in part, by its association with a constellation of flexible terms and concepts which allow the ecotourism storyline to be reconfigured to suit many purposes and beliefs, and which disguise deep contradictions. The role of education plays a distinctive part in this, hinting at a sense of the public good and processes of agreed social and cultural transformation, while denoting a far more limited project of passing on information and relatively mundane behaviour modification.

Perhaps the collective experiences of place (or nature) of ecotourists have a profound contribution to make to the meanings and senses of reality which ultimately shape environmental politics. What I have tried to show here is that there is a considerable gulf between the conception of tourism-as-education which such a program would require, and the simplistic and undemanding notions of education which predominate in ecotourism discourse. A project of education for sustainable development through nature tourism would substantially disrupt some tourism conventions, and also pose some challenges for environmental education. 🌱

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