

Ecotourism: socio-economic and socio-cultural contexts

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Abstract. The aim of this article is to identify and analyse the socio-economic and socio-cultural contexts of ecotourism, which, unlike traditional tourism, which often causes negative changes in the environment, is focused (as officially declared) on protecting and restoring it. The methodology of the study is sociological science, orienting the social sciences to the fact that: 1) everything that happens in society is the result of socially oriented actions of those or other social actors; 2) social actions are the main cause of any social change; 3) the main social change is a change in the existing social structures in society, which, in turn, lead to changes in the consciousness and behaviour of people. The scientific novelty of this paper lies in the clarification of a number of concepts that describe not always explicit, but very effective socio-economic and socio-cultural contexts of ecotourism with lasting social consequences. The scientific novelty includes the method of sociological analysis applied by the author, combined with the dialectical method. In conclusion, it should be said that environmentalism, of which ecotourism is a derivative, is first of all an understanding of: 1) that the world's dominant profit-oriented economic activity is morally obsolete; 2) that the problem of the highly controversial primordial wildness is far from exhausted; 3) that primordial wildness, as a kind of antipode of culture, carried with it many abilities of existence and survival in past ecological systems (sense of smell, hearing, touch, for example) that we have not lost, as is commonly believed, but rather have fallen asleep (suppressed), or are in the process of dying out, which can be the subject of discussion and rewilding. But the main conclusion is that ecotourism, if only because tourists can be involved in the solution of rewilding issues, can become a way out of the artificially formed consumer psychology (exploitative in its essence) on the one hand and the establishment of a real harmony between society, nature and the individual, which, in fact, has never existed – on the other.

1 Introduction

The period of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century is marked by a sharp increase in the mobility of the world's population [1-20]. There are many reasons for this.

One of such reasons is a rather unstable labour market, forcing masses of labour force to move constantly in search of work and more or less stable earnings.

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The second reason is practically limitless technical possibilities that ensure high spatial mobility of the population of the Earth.

The third reason can be considered to be a rather intensive development of tourism and corresponding tourist mobility, which itself became a factor of encouraging people to travel, because, for example, stories (which almost all of us constantly hear) about, say, a holiday spent by travelling long distances in search of unusual impressions are a powerful factor of mental encouragement and practical inclusion in tourist activity.

However, the formation (constitution) and subsequent institutionalisation of ecotourism is conditioned, in addition to the above, by at least three other little researched reasons, in particular:

- «media hype» that covered ecotourism and often criticised traditional tourism services, which sometimes had a «negative socio-cultural and ecological change» [10, p. xvii];

- a kind of sickness, i.e. a growing longing for wild nature (destroyed by the continuous development of industry), which can be defined as ecological longing, and therefore an attempt «to rewild my own life, to escape from ecological boredom», and at the same time to restore the neglected faculties that people possessed in the conditions of wild life [16, p.11];

- relative exhaustion of the possibilities of traditional tourism business and search for new directions of its development.

Ecotourism, by and large, was formed not only under the slogans of studying, admiring and enjoying wild nature, and not only under the slogans of protecting the still existing restoration of the lost natural environment, but also as a result of a peculiar construction of the cult of wildness, carried out under the slogan 'Back to the wild'. The same peculiar ecological media hype played a significant role in this. In fact, it often turned criticism of traditional tourism into a kind of advertising.

It is true that this criticism led to the parallel formation of ideas about responsible tourism, which should focus on minimising environmental impact, respecting the culture of the host country, maximising benefits for the local population and maximising tourist satisfaction. However, researchers forget to mention the principle of maximising revenues to be earned by tourism companies, including those practising ecotourism. All this makes it necessary to describe the socio-economic and socio-cultural contexts of the formation, institutionalisation and development of modern ecotourism.

2 Materials and Methods

Proceeding from the fact that the author's aim is to describe the socio-economic and socio-cultural contexts of the formation and development of ecotourism, the basic method of research was sociology, according to which: 1) everything that happens in society is the result of socially oriented actions of certain social actors; 2) social actions are the main cause of any social change; 3) the main social change is the change of social structures existing in society, which, in turn, lead to changes in consciousness. If so, ecotourism should be considered as a socially constructed, attractive phenomenon, but being a phenomenon of market order, it is burdened with a number of contradictions.

3 Results and Discussion

To begin with, let us recall one of the most recent definitions of ecotourism, which is derived from an analysis of all previous definitions. It reads: «The definition of 'ecotourism' in the twenty-first century not only refers to the appreciation of beautiful and

rich ecological landscapes in the process of tourism but also emphasises the importance of the evolution of environmental protection behaviour and thinking patterns... Ecotourism is aimed at protecting natural ecology, emphasizing respect for the heterogeneity of nature, and treating nature as an independent life» [20, p. 22]. It means that ecotourists «should pay attention to not hurting the life of the species while enjoying the natural beauty». While enjoying, they can observe, draw, photograph, meditate, listen to the natural sounds of nature, but they should not disturb, let alone catch animals and so on [20, p. 22-23].

In fact, this definition is somewhat declarative. It rather expresses the desirable rather than the actual, because real ecotourism practices are not so idyllic.

It should be noted that, among other things, ecotourism was formed as an intensively growing (expanding) segment of the same tourist market, which formally looked like an alternative, interpreted as alternative, but continued to seek benefits, i.e. «clamouring to take advantage of new alternative tourism opportunities in places that were virtually terra incognita» [16, p. xii].

In such conditions, the slogan of restoring the land, sea and human life, which «decay and finally disappear in the face of modern industry» [16, p. 195], began to be used as a slogan for the restoration of the land, sea and human life. [16, p. 195] began to play a rather contradictory role – the real restoration of wild nature, but oriented towards profit maximisation, which often excluded one from the other and resembled the old colonialist expansion, now carried out in the form of ecocolonialism, or eco-imperialism, as it is defined by the author of this concept, Dutchman Peter Driessen in his book «Eco-Imperialism: Green Power, Black Death», of which only some fragments are available to us. The author states that modern environmental policies are lethal policies. It is «a virulent kind of neo-colonialism that many call eco-imperialism» [6].

However, the book is written in defence of eco- or green business, one of which is ecotourism, and calls for those who prevent this, i.e. the so-called eco-radicals, to be held accountable. According to Driessen, the current «animosity towards business and profits» «are rooted too much too much in conjectural problems and theoretical needs of future generations – and too little in real, immediate, life-and-death needs of present generations, especially billions of poor rural people in developing countries. The mutant doctrines give radical activists unprecedented leverage to impose the loftiest of developed world standards on companies, communities and nations, while ignoring the needs, priorities and aspirations of people who struggle daily just to survive» [6].

What can be said about this?

Firstly, hostility to business and profit does not arise by chance. It is global in nature, for the billions of poor rural people (and not only rural and not only in developing countries) who do not care about tourism exist precisely because of the very inequitable distribution of social resources, which generates ever-deepening inequalities between the top and the bottom. This inequality, expressed mathematically, has given rise to the concept of the digital divide.

Secondly, the theoretical needs of future generations discussed are not at all presumptive, but rather theoretically justified, because the problems of future generations lie in the deepening social inequalities mentioned above. Otherwise, we have not a theory, but a certain ideological construction, an example of which we are discussing now, which looks like another mutant doctrine that does not contribute at all to the above-mentioned struggle for survival.

Be that as it may, a series of books have already appeared describing the phenomena behind the concepts of eco-imperialism (green imperialism), even eco-colonialism and green business. But their subject matter goes far beyond ecotourism. In addition, these concepts are interpreted very contradictorily by the authors.

Here are just a couple of illustrative facts.

Numerous African parks, often visited by tourists, represent an imperial prototype of a park, which is a peculiar image of the socio-political structure of African society: the landscape is African, but the semantic content is imperial. They embody the idea that wildlife is also «a precious inheritance of the Empire», and that the Empire is, for example, English.

Incidentally, originally «some Africans were tolerated in parks and seen as one of the attractions that drew visitors – as long as they lived in a “traditional” way». It was believed that «the presence of natives would be a feature of interest to many visitors and there is no occasion to disturb them» ..., because «visitors would be entranced by its few African residents’ ‘picturesque kraals, their costume, cattle, crops and customs’». ... Somewhat later, Africans were no longer considered «picturesque» and they were all evicted from the parks, for the parks were now considered «part of the imperial estate (as British prime minister Joseph Chamberlain once called it) was to be devoted to conservation, recreation, and the production of pleasure» [1, p.291-292].

In another book written by the American environmental historian Alfred W. Crosby «*Ecological Imperialism The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900-1900*» [5], which is recognised as the classic book on the history of ecology in Europe. [5], which is recognised as a classic, describes the history of European ecological expansion in the world. And although this book does not even hint at the problems of ecological tourism, but the «displacement and replacement of the native peoples in the temperate zones» described in it, which, as the author points out in the preamble, «was more a matter of biology than of military conquest», in many ways resembles the modern ever-increasing tourist expansion in the places of visitation, when for the sake of growth of tourist flow not only landscapes, but also the culture of local peoples are changed. The island of Bali in Indonesia is a perfect example of this.

Returning to the sociological analysis of ecotourism problems, we should also pay attention to the social meaning of the concepts of nature protection and rewilding, which acquire a categorical character because they are interdisciplinary. The point is that the same concepts are widely used in environmental sociology and social ecology, which raise related issues, albeit from different angles.

Here it makes sense to recall one of the latest definitions of rewilding. It reads: «Rewilding is the process of rebuilding, following major human disturbance, a natural ecosystem by restoring natural processes and the complete or near complete food web at all trophic levels as a self-sustaining and resilient ecosystem with biota that would have been present had the disturbance not occurred» [14, p.3].

In general, rewilding implies «a paradigm shift in the relationship between humans and nature», and «the ultimate goal of rewilding is the restoration of functioning native ecosystems containing the full range of species at all trophic levels while reducing human control and pressures» and so on [14, p.3].

So, if there is a question of nature protection, and even more so in order to expand the material base serving ecotourism, sociological analysis suggests two tangential questions, namely:

- firstly, protection from what (?), which is primarily a market economy (oriented towards ever-increasing profits) that can develop exclusively through expansion in different directions, in particular expansion into wilderness to make it profitable, as well as expansion into other markets to increase visits (sales);
- secondly, protection against whom (?), and these are primarily profit-seeking economic actors (e.g., antitrust law is one of the ways of such protection);
- thirdly, protection for what purpose (?), and this is primarily the protection of wildlife that has not yet been lost but may bring income, which also provides for the restoration of what has been lost, including by correcting the dominant economic policy.

In addition, if there is a question of rewilding, a number of other questions also arise, namely:

- firstly, what is to be restored?
- secondly, on what scale to restore?
- thirdly, how the restored will affect the economy, social relations, culture, in general, and, most importantly, profits.

Consequently, only what can be attractive for tourists can be restored, and attractiveness is also a kind of advertising of places to visit.

As we can see, the development of ecotourism can be considered as one of the goals of wildlife restoration, and one of the means, and a kind of beautiful threat to its final loss.

All these questions have not only ecological, economic, social, but also philosophical sense. For example, the English poet of the XIX century (and priest) Gerard Manley Hopkins, after seeing the famous Inversnaid waterfalls on the Scottish lake Loch Lomond, wrote poems where the words:

What would the world be, once bereft
Of wet and of wildness? Let them be left,
O let them be left, wildness and wet;
Long live the weeds and the wilderness yet.

Monbiot, by the way, quotes these lines in order to draw the reader's attention to the fact that a poetic hymn to wilderness, calling for its protection, is possible. But the market, including the ecotourism market, is far from romantic. Like any other market, it is radically pragmatic.

It should be noted that the philosophical and poetic delight in pristine wilderness is predominantly romantic. In its primordiality it is inherent in almost all modern people, which is a significant lever in the development of ecotourism – a stimulus to its development. But the philosophy of the market is somewhat different. It is a pragmatic philosophy, or, more simply, a philosophy of benefit, which in sociological reading means benefit from relations with so-called others, whose consciousness and behaviour can be constructed in the necessary parameters. Although this is not always possible and only under certain conditions, it is possible and often very successful, as evidenced by the growth of income from tourism in general and ecotourism in particular.

Besides, is it necessary to protect and restore weeds and wildlife everywhere and always, because one may ask, what will happen to agriculture – this antagonist of wildlife?

This question is not really an ecological question, but rather an worldview one.

By the way, the poetic attitude to wild nature can be understood as a kind of attitude to the lost, which arises from the perception of what is left of wild nature, and the philosophical approach is just a reminder of the degree of culture/nature relations, the violation of which leads to the degradation of culture itself, because the same rewilding can serve both as a means of overcoming the crisis in culture/nature relations and as a means of deepening this crisis. And, sadly, it can also contribute to deepening the crisis in the culture itself, because it stimulates the development of ecotourism in the interests of its market-oriented version?

We will not give examples of cultural wildness, i.e. wildness formed within postmodern culture, unfolding under the slogan ‘Back to the wild!’, but we should raise several important questions:

- firstly, is not the biodiversity crisis [19, p. xxi] the reason for the formation of such a science as conservation biology? [11, p. 12];
- secondly, are not both the first and the second, i.e. the biodiversity crisis and the formation of conservation biology, indicators of a crisis in a culture born in a market economy, expansive by its very nature, where expansion into the wilderness is one of the many directions of exaptation?

– thirdly, is not the development of ecotourism always unconscious: a) a way of engaging with the remaining wilderness, which can be lost quite quickly; b) a way of social protest against practices of wilderness destruction; c) a way out of the above-mentioned cultural crisis; d) a way of engaging with practices of wilderness restoration, which are still in their infancy? And so on.

Clearly, these questions are rhetorical and there are many such questions. However, there is one more, but not yet voiced question: ‘Is market-oriented ecotourism development really the vehicle that can provide positive answers to them?’

Rather no than yes. More often, it creates an attractive appearance that is far from the essence, a simulacrum of revitalisation.

Meanwhile, the extinction crisis declared by representatives of conservation biology [17, p.33] is, by and large, not quite about the extinction of wildlife and not quite about the crisis of biological diversity. It is about a rather real threat not of integration but of extinction of cultures and human population of the earth, carried out under the slogans of globalisation, despite the fact that it is the extinction crisis that is «the most important – and gloomy – scientific discovery of the twentieth century» [12, p.11].

The concept of extinction of diversity speaks not only about the disappearance of biological species, but also about the narrowing of the biological basis of their survival in general.

And if so, then industry, agriculture and wildlife should cease to be antagonists, and ecotourism could become a significant means of overcoming the crisis. But for this purpose, the tourist should be oriented not to admire what has been preserved, but to get involved in conservation and protection.

Meanwhile, ecotourism, contrary to the fact that «around the world, ecotourism has been hailed as a panacea» as «a way to fund conservation and scientific research, protect fragile and pristine ecosystems, benefit rural communities, promote development in poor countries, enhance ecological and cultural sensitivity, instill environmental awareness and a social conscience in the travel industry, satisfy and educate the discriminating tourist, and, some claim, build world peace» [2, p. 5], does not exclude practices where «the open, treeless hills» or «the scoured acid grassland» sell, excuse me, try to «promote to tourists» «as natural», «as one of the largest wildernesses left in the UK» [16, p. 69]. The cases noted by David Fennell already in the preface to the above-quoted book «Ecotourism» are not uncommon, «where tourists endured swimming in water with human waste; guides capturing sloths and caiman for tourists to photograph; raw sewage openly dumped into the ocean; mother cheetahs killing their cubs to avoid the harassment of cheetah-chasing tourists; and an ecotourism industry under-regulated with little hope for enforcement» [10, p. xviii]. Many researchers have recorded something similar in different regions of the world.

How can we explain such a terrible contradiction between officially cultivated expectations and actual ecotourism practices?

There are two main reasons for such contradictions:

– the first, is a general cultural crisis resulting from the previous industrial development of the world, which took place under the rather attractive slogan of rationalisation based, in reality, on calculation and hence the extensive use of mathematical methods;

– the second, is the general civilisational crisis caused by the profit orientation, which is basic in the whole social organisation of both modern and postmodern societies.

Is it surprising that ecotourism, despite its not very long history of institutionalisation and development of special infrastructure functions on industrial principles on the one hand and, as noted, is one of the segments of the general tourist market as ecotourism market.

If so, then all the contradictions between traditional tourism and ecotourism, noted by various interpreters, automatically turn mainly into an advertisement of ecotourism, which, although it has its own contradictions, they are seen as resolvable.

Incidentally, the relationship between defence and rewilding is not so simple. As George Monbiot notes, «some of our conservation groups appear to be not just zoophobic but also dendrophobic: afraid of trees. They seem afraid of the disorderly, unplanned, unstructured revival of the natural world» [16, p.210].

It seems to us that these phobias are rather peculiar socio-cultural consequences of pragmatic rationality, oriented towards success in a broad sense and profit in a narrower one. And if so, then the increase in tourist flows to the world of unstructured wilderness regeneration is a kind of protest against such consequences. Monbiot, on the other hand, points out that wildlife tourism, and the involvement of tourists in the cause of rewilding and introduction, particularly in Scotland, generates far greater profits than deer-stalking.

We read: «A study commissioned by the Scottish government calculates that wild-life tourism in Scotland is already worth £276 million a year. Rewilding and the reintroduction of other missing species could greatly enhance this figure, generating many more jobs than deer-stalking does today» [16, p.102].

The point is that tourists, who have been captivated by the idea of a new human reunion with nature and, accordingly, back-to-nature narratives, agree to pay even for being involved in tree planting, animal care, etc.

By the way, although «Conservation volunteer movements are a significant force in the development of ecotourism in the South, but their presence is often fraught with local conflicts, which intersect with broader struggles over environment, development, resource exploitation and the global expansion of Northern-based ecotourism in the South. The example of Calabash Caye shows that ecotourism, and its leading edge of volunteer movements, can often replicate the problems associated with mass tourism, albeit on a smaller scale» [7, p. 68 - 69].

Moreover, as Monbiot notes, wildlife protection and restoration practices sometimes resemble the Third Reich's practices of forced rewilding. In his book, he devotes an entire section entitled «The Conservation Prison» to the analysis of this process, occupying almost 20 pages of text, where he says that some places are turning into something like conservation prisons [16, p. 202, p. 209].

We will not discuss this problem extensively, but it is not superfluous to note the so-called «potential problems – both for the environment and visitors – of uncontrolled access» [4, p.28], especially restoration in order to attract tourists. Both the so-called uncontrolled development of industry and uncontrolled access to places of visitation are, first of all, profit-destroying factors, and only then a real concern for the preservation of the environment. Simply put, it is a tourist resource, and «the use of tourism resources could not be left uncontrolled without running the risk of their deterioration, or even destruction». Moreover, although it is always declared that что «the satisfaction of tourism requirements must not be prejudicial to the social and economic interests of the population in tourist areas, to the environment and above all to natural resources». But it is always added that these resources «are the fundamental attractions of tourism and historical and cultural sites». And you conclude that they should be seen, because they «are part of the heritage of mankind» [9, p. 105 - 106].

By the way, the problem of access is somewhat broader than it may seem. Colonial policy, for example, is also a special way of gaining access to other people's resources. If such a policy is carried out in the interests of corporations and states, and in particular «in the mining interests, tourism, and even conservation initiatives, so-called 'green grabbing'» [18, p. 1]. For example, only «since the turn of the twenty-first century» and only in «the global South» has there been a «global land grab»: it «suggests that the tally might well

exceed 200 million hectares, which is roughly equivalent to the surface of Western Europe» [18, p. 1].

In other words, the problem of access is the problem through which everything that happens in society takes on a social colouring, including the economy of tourism in general, and ecotourism in particular. The way in which the issue of access is addressed for different groups of people is a major cultural component, an indicator of the relationships that develop between different groups of people. Moreover, if wild nature is included in the economic turnover, for example, in the form of ecotourism, it is, by and large, no longer completely wild. It now falls into the category of profit-generating phenomena, i.e. a type of capital. According to the British Jim Butcher's definition, it is natural capital. But if so, it is difficult to agree with Butcher's understanding of ecotourism, according to which it is a «localised harmony, or 'symbiosis', between human needs and the environment», «between conservation and development», and so on. [3, p. viii; p.3]. Symbiosis – yes, but far from always harmony. The whole question is from what angle to consider ecotourism. In sociological terms, it is a special system of relations between groups of people, mediated by their different attitudes to the environment, depending on their social statuses.

And if so, the questions become particularly important:

- the purposes of feralisation;
- the means of feralisation;
- the measure of feralisation, and so on.

These are not idle questions that carry not only a commercial component, but also an attitudinal and, more broadly, a socio-cultural one.

Feralisation should be understood as an expansion of the field of culture and an element of culture, first of all, rather than its antipode, known as pre-cultural existence of people.

It is a special way of humanising both external nature and man himself. It is a peculiar return of man from the artificially created world, in which he rather plays the role of a man than lives an actual human life, to the world of immediacy, peculiar to wild nature.

Ecotourism can be understood as a kind of going to the world of immediacy, which would be a false understanding, because you have to pay for it.

Here it is appropriate to recall that in his time, the cited Monbiot Conrad Lorenz – the founder of the science of animal behaviour (ethology), was also a supporter of eugenics, based on the idea that there are negative genetic consequences of civilization, and therefore it is time for a new feralisation of man by artificial selection to avoid the extinction of mankind [16, p. 203].

We speak of savagery rather:

- in a metaphorical meaning, different from the real historical savagery cultivated so far;
- as a departure from the world of play, described by sociologists in the categories of statuses and roles, into the world of actual human immediacy, which has become a fact of culture and is therefore free from animal cruelty and the like;
- as humanity proper, distorted by the institutionalised system of social inequalities and so on.

Modern ecotourism is yet only a shadow of this relationship, but a shadow through which one can see the practical possibility of abandoning the understanding of man as king, to an understanding of man as the most developed part of nature, now developing in the form of actual culture.

Immediacy, and consequently sincerity and inner attraction, are now more often interpreted as deficiencies because they are not pragmatic, they do not bring gains, but rather losses. They do not provide an opportunity to manipulate others. In fact, though – it is primal humanity that requires rewilding. And ecotourists, sometimes consciously and

sometimes not so much, seek just such wildness. It hides the need for wildness that sometimes awakens in us.

In other words, such «wildness refers not only to remote and awe-inspiring places but also to our immediate surroundings» [13, p. 90 - 91].

Although with the basic call of Michael Gunter, trying to show how ecotourism changes thinking and motivates to action, ‘Think Local, Act Local’ [13, p. 231], one cannot agree categorically.

The point is that thinking is categorical in nature, and categories are always a matter of generality, i.e. a worldview issue. And if so, then the questions of ecology, place and ways of human stay in ecological systems, where one of the ways is ecotourism, are worldview questions. They should be understood in this way.

The dialectic here is that you should think globally (but not globalistically), and act locally, understanding what consequences your actions can lead to. Such thinking is called dialectical thinking, that is, thinking that can resolve contradictions in the logic of concepts. And intuitive thinking, with its inherent logic, of which Gunther speaks, can do nothing of the sort.

4 Conclusions

In conclusion, environmentalism, of which ecotourism is a derivative, is not arbitrary, dictatorial or anything else. It is the realisation that the profit-oriented economic activity that dominates the world is obsolete. This means that the problem of the highly controversial primordial savagery is far from exhausted. The fact is that, in addition to predatory consumption, it carried with it many abilities of existence and survival that have either already been lost to us in past ecological systems, or are in the stage of extinction.

However, the problem is not only about getting rid of monotonous (for example, caused by agricultural monocultures) or gloomy (for example, caused by deforestation) landscapes, but also about making the possibility of admiring and enjoying wild nature not dependent on status and the associated measure of access to it, but becoming normal universal human abilities on the one hand and normal universal human needs on the other, i.e., phenomena of sociocultural order, accessible both economically and socio-legally,

These abilities and needs are already beyond the boundaries of artificially formed consumer psychology, exploited in the modern ecotourism business. They are the basic factors in establishing a real harmony between man and nature, which, in fact, has never existed.

Wild nature is not really a holiday park. It reminds us of our past, but it also shows us what we can return to if we behave ‘badly’ by destroying the material foundations of our being in the world.

And as for admiring and enjoying the wilderness, a closer look will reveal that we are admiring ourselves, i.e. how far we have strayed from it. What remains to be realised is

- how much we have lost;
- how much more we have to do to recover what we have lost;
- what human society must become in order to realise this.

Ecotourism research will help us in this.

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