

Towards Best Practice in Mediating the Ecotourism-Environment Relationship.

David Purdie – *Graduated 2006*

Abstract

Since ecotourism's popular inception in the 1980s, it has arguably produced as much contention as measurable positive outcomes. Ecotourism should contribute to conservation, while also providing environmental education for visitors. However, previous research has highlighted knowledge gaps within the New Zealand ecotourism sector which are likely to hinder the future development of such businesses; making it difficult to achieve these two key aspirations. Generally, operators may lack an understanding of those partaking in the experiences they provide; while participants in such experiences may be equally unsure of exactly what operators offer. The ideal situation is one in which the environment, operators and visitors all benefit from ecotourism.

This nationwide research established strong and coherent links between what New Zealand ecotourism operators are seeking to achieve, and how these goals are reflected in the experience of their visitors. The New Zealand ecotourism sector is examined utilising a mixed methods approach. A series of semi-structured interviews were conducted with ecotourism operators followed by a quantitative survey of visitors to these same businesses. The second phase of research was closely informed by the preceding interviews with operators. This research therefore provides a balanced discussion of the ecotourism-environment relationship within New Zealand by drawing insights from both supply- and demand-sides of ecotourism.

Key findings indicate that visitors considered the operators' environmental goals important, although the majority would have preferred more information regarding these goals pre-purchase. These operations make contributions to conservation in relative proportion to their scale. Therefore, the context within which ecotourism businesses operate influences the ecotourism-environment relationship. Specifically, differences in visitor mix and product characteristics have implications for the depth of environmental education and the degree of conservation activity possible. These results suggest that an ecotourism operation's environmental sensitivity depends on their context — specifically physical setting, product offered and visitor market(s) — not simply on scale. However, participation in some operations may be limited by discord between market needs, and how operators perceive those needs. Businesses are advised to improve the communication of environmental goals to prospective visitors. It is argued that ecotourism operations possess differing abilities to contribute to conservation according to their scale of their business.

It is concluded that ecotourism can indeed be a force for protection, when developed appropriately according to context. The general commitment to environmentally sensitive management by the operations in this study bodes well for future ecotourism development within New Zealand. However, this research has also highlighted future challenges for the sector. There is a need to clearly communicate environmental goals to prospective visitors. Mechanisms should be established that allow feedback regarding the degree and format of operator/visitor interaction. It is also important to facilitate communication with visitors that is appropriate for the physical context

within which the business operates, the nature of the product offered and the characteristics of the visitor mix.