

Operationalising the Ecotourism Opportunity Spectrum (ECOS): Case Examples from China.

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Abstract

Ecotourism has been growing rapidly since 1980s (WTO, 2000). However, there is still no agreement on the definition of ecotourism (Page and Dowling, 2002), or ecotourist (Wight, 2002). The concept and implementation of ecotourism vary according to the country (Lindberg and McKercher, 1997). And therefore, it is not surprising there are also no universally accepted standards for ecotourism development. As a tool for regional development ecotourism is considered to be a form of tourism to achieve overall balance in environmental, socio-cultural and economical impacts (Lindberg and McKercher, 1997). Suitable management for ecotourism development is essential in order to be able to maximise the positive impacts and minimise negative impacts on all aspects of tourism.

Since the 1960s, management of tourism development in natural areas has been widely discussed in tourism literature (Butler, 1996). The concept of carrying capacity was quickly accepted as a management tool for tourism development in natural areas (Butler, 1996). But, since the 1980s, the validity of this criterion has been questioned. Instead, alternative management techniques have been developed and emphasis has shifted from determining the limits to identifying the opportunities within destinations. Ecotourism here is considered as a form of tourism which is different from other nature-based tourism, therefore, particular management techniques for ecotourism development is essential to achieve the goal of sustainable tourism development. A particular management framework particular for ecotourism called the Ecotourism Opportunity Spectrum (ECOS) was created by Boyd and Butler (1996), based on the Recreation Tourism Opportunity Spectrum. While the ROS (Recreation Opportunity Spectrum) has been applied in various locations, there has been little application made on the TOS and ECOS.

This study applies the ECOS framework in two ecotourism destinations within Southeastern China. The objectives of this study are to assess the ecotourism opportunities of these two resorts (Ding Hu Mountain Resort and Xi Qiao Mountain Resort) and to assess the applicability of the ECOS framework outside the Canadian region in which it was developed. Another aim of this study is to assess if there any differences between the ecotourism opportunities of these two destinations, based on the findings applying the various management factors of the ECOS framework (access, other resource-related activities, attractions offered, existing infrastructure, social interaction, level of skill & knowledge, acceptance of visitor impacts and management).

The findings of this study reveal that Chinese ecotourists are different from the ecotourists of developed countries based on existing literature and ecotourism studies, and therefore, it is difficult to apply the ECOS framework so as to assess the ecotourism opportunities of Chinese destinations. However, the findings also show that even in a Chinese context, there exist differences in both the preferences and opinions of ecotourists. This implies that the ecotourism opportunities of these two ecotourism destinations are different. Cultural and social factors emerge as the central reason why it

is difficult to apply all the ECOS factors to the two study areas in China. However, a number of useful recommendations are offered to enable managers to further develop ecotourism opportunity within Ding Hu and Xi Qiao Mountain Resorts.