

# Abstract: A Critical Examination Exploring the Differences between Geotourism and Ecotourism

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## **Abstract: A Critical Examination Exploring the Differences between Geotourism and Ecotourism**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Geotourism differentiates itself from ecotourism by focusing on the working landscape of the region. Geotourism is not bounded by a protected or pristine area, but ties sustainability to all aspects of the region where people interact with the environment. This paper suggests that geotourism will emerge as a new way to view sustainable tourism even though the tourism literature is inundated with a variety of sustainable tourism definitions and niche segments like ecotourism. Geotourism is presented as a measurable and concrete concept. The forthcoming Geotourism Survey Instrument is a result of this study.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

The purpose of this paper is to analyze geotourism's uniqueness as a market segment within sustainable tourism, highlighting its differences from ecotourism. In the last 30 years, tourism has experienced a shift from the Fordist model of mass tourism, which concentrates on high standardization of tourism services and lack of product differentiation, to a more conscientious and small scale style of travel (Perez & Sampol, 2000). This paradigm shift is evident with the rise in popularity surrounding alternative forms of tourism such as sustainable tourism, ecotourism, and now geotourism.

Geotourism is an emerging niche market within sustainable tourism and is centered on sustaining and enhancing the geographical character of place (Stokes, Cook, & Drew, 2003). Many of the ideas that influence geotourism have existed in the field of sustainable tourism since the publication of *Our Common Future*, also known as the Brundtland Report (WCED-World Commission of the Environment and Development, 1987), introduced sustainable development, but it was not until 1997 that Jonathan Tourtellot of National Geographic defined the term geotourism as "encompassing all aspects of travel- not just the environment...tourism that sustains or enhances the geographical character of a place-its environment, heritage, aesthetics, culture, and well being of its residents- describes completely all aspects of sustainability in travel," (Stokes et al., 2003). Instead of focusing on sustaining one specific dimension of the travel experience, geotourism unites various travel experiences all focusing on sustaining a

destination's unique character (Stokes et al., 2003). Therefore, geotourism can be beneficial for both the tourist and the visited because it can provide the tourist with an authentic experience while holistically sustaining the destination's unique qualities.

In this paper, we identify the components of geotourism and contrast them with ecotourism in order to uncover the uniqueness of geotourism as a form of sustainable tourism. We then took those components and developed a scale to measure the geotouristic tendencies of travelers. The purpose of this paper, however, is to provide the background necessary for future research on geotourism.

## RESEARCH METHODS

The method used to contrast geotourism with ecotourism within the sustainability paradigm was a critical examination of the academic literature to determine if geotourism's definition is unique or just ecotourism with a new name.

## FINDINGS

The literature review revealed that geotourism's definition contributes to the sustainable tourism literature in three ways: first, it provides a clear definition of what to sustain at travel destinations (culture, heritage, aesthetics, environment and the well-being of the residents); second, it differs from ecotourism by encompassing the geographical character of place instead of singularly focusing on sustaining the environment as Fennel (2001) and Juric et al. (2002) suggests; and thirdly, the specificity of geotourism's definition provides a testable concept that can be used to determine if visitors to a region are geotravelers.

The academic literature exposes a plethora of definitions referring to what constitutes sustainable tourism and ecotourism creating ambiguity in which definition is the best. While there is a common, agreed upon definition for sustainable development from *Our Common Future* (WCED, 1987), there are many different interpretations of what sustainable tourism and ecotourism are supposed to be (Butler, 1999; Fennel, 2001; Honey, 2008). Butler (1999, pg. 11) argues that sustainable tourism's ambiguity has resulted in its success because it is "indefinable and thus has become all things to all interested parties." Since sustainable tourism does not have an agreed upon or unifying definition, the term has been widely used for the subjective purposes of the definer, and has resulted in the fragmentation of sustainable tourism to include ecotourism (Ceballos-Lascuráin, 1996), geotourism (Stokes, Cook, & Drew, 2003), 'new tourism' (Rosenow & Pulsipher, 1979), ethnic tourism (Moscardo & Pearce, 1999), pro-poor tourism (Ashley & Roe, 2002), alternative tourism (Butler, 1990), literary tourism (Squire, 1996), justice tourism (Scheyvens, 2002), reconciliation tourism (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2006), and volunteer tourism (Wearing, 2001) just to name a few. Honey (2008, pg. 13) believes that the "confusion over the definition of ecotourism is partly due to its historical roots, which broadly stated, can be traced to four sources: (1) scientific, conservation, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs); (2) multilateral aid institutions; (3) developing countries; and (4) the travel industry and traveling public." Both sustainable tourism and ecotourism suffer from an abundance of definitions as noted by Butler (1999), Fennel (2001), Juric et al. (2002), and Honey (2008). Geotourism takes advantage of the

uncertainty around the sustainable tourism and ecotourism definitions by providing a clear, singular, specific, and holistic definition that focuses on sustaining all aspects of the region, thus making it “all aspects of sustainability in travel” according to Tourtellot’s definition.

Geotourism’s definition exposes the narrow focus of some ecotourism definitions. Fennel (2001) in his content analysis of ecotourism found that out of 85 ecotourism definitions, 45 percent limited ecotourism to occurring within natural areas and 50 percent of the definitions make no inference to culture within their definitions. This clearly portrays that there is little agreement over what constitutes the definition of ecotourism and that according to at least 50 percent of the definitions there are substantial differences between ecotourism and geotourism. Geotourism is not bound to protected or pristine areas like many of the ecotourism’s definitions. For example, Ceballos-Lascurain (1987) cited in Lück (2002) begins his definition of ecotourism with “Traveling to relatively undisturbed or uncontaminated natural areas ...” and McNeely (1988) cited in Juric et al. (2002) defines ecotourism as “visitors who travel to protected areas.” The definitions of ecotourism suggest it is nature and/or activity based inferring that a tourist can come to a destination and be an ecotourist for part of the day. The argument for geotourism is that it encompasses a working landscape. Geotourism can include festivals, shopping, towns, local cafes or anything that sustainably promotes the region’s character. Is a rodeo ecotourism? Is a historic battlefield ecotourism? Both of these are excluded under many definitions of ecotourism because they do not take place within a protected area. Geotourism holistically includes the environment, culture, aesthetics, heritage, and well-being of the residents while Blamey’s (2001) definition of ecotourism focuses primarily on nature, secondarily on education, and thirdly on the well-being of the local people. Ecotourism’s boundaries are strictly pronounced. In contrast, geotourism occurs in working landscapes where people and the environment coexist. It is not limited to protected or pristine areas as ecotourism’s definition suggests. A geotourism destination includes towns, farms, forests, public and private lands. This convergence of landscapes where people interact with the environment and each other represents the geographical character of place mentioned in Tourtellot’s definition of geotourism. Geotourism attempts to sustain the region’s landscape through perpetuation of local values and attracting visitors who actively promote local values through their travel behavior.

The rise of geotourism is already evident in the geotourism mapguides created by National Geographic and the many countries that have agreed to manage tourism according to the geotourism definition. Geotourism mapguides have been created for the Northeast Kingdom of Vermont; the Arizona-Sonora Desert region; Baja California, the Appalachian Mountains; the Crown of the Continent region which includes northwest Montana, southeast British Columbia, and southwest Alberta; and the Greater Yellowstone Region of Montana, Wyoming, and Idaho (National Geographic, 2008). Romania, Guatemala, Rhode Island, and Norway have also signed on to developed tourism in their region under the principles of geotourism (National Geographic, 2008). The United States National Park Service has even called geotourism “a global phenomenon” and is using it as “a tool for environmental leadership” (National Park Service, 2008). Geotourism, with its holistic definition of sustaining and enhancing the geographical character of place, has the potential to bring real sustainability to travel

regions by satisfying the local people's desire not to have their way of life change and by satisfying the traveler's desire to have an authentic travel experience.

## **APPLICATION OF RESULTS**

Instead of focusing on the inherent differences between ecotourism and geotourism mentioned above, the authors found it best to view geotourism as a holistic form of sustainable tourism incorporating themes from various types of sustainable tourism segments such as integrated rural tourism (Saxena, Clark, Oliver, & Ilbery, 2007), cultural heritage tourism (Boyd, 2002; Kang & Moscardo, 2006; Moscardo & Pearce, 1999), community-based tourism (Blackstock, 2005; Joppe, 1996), pro-poor tourism (Ashley & Roe, 2002), and ecotourism (Ceballos-Lascuráin, 1996; Scheyvens, 1999). The desire to experience pristine natural areas without negatively impacting them is borrowed from ecotourism; the desire to experience unique cultural heritage is adapted from culture and heritage tourism; and the concern for the well-being of the local community is adopted from ecotourism, integrated rural tourism (IRT), pro-poor tourism and community based tourism (Figure 1).

Since the findings indicate that geotourism is a unique niche travel segment, the authors created an instrument to measure the geotouristic tendencies of travelers. It is believed that an instrument identifying travelers based upon their geotouristic tendencies will benefit the tourism industry by allowing destinations to better understand the attitudes and behaviors of their visitors. Juric et al. (2002) in their development of the Ecotourism Interest Scale acknowledged that the many ecotourism definitions limit ecotourist identification because the definition of ecotourism changes from study to study and therefore is not always generalizable. The specific definition of geotourism provided by National Geographic is geotourism's strength, which allows measurement and therefore identification of geotourists to be generalized across all studies. Further research on development of the geotourism survey instrument (GSI) will be tested in a pre-selected geotourism region by National Geographic. Development and testing of the GSI are forthcoming.

## **DISCUSSION**

Geotourism fills a void in the sustainable tourism and ecotourism literature by providing a clear and specific definition of what sustainable tourism should sustain (the environment, culture, aesthetics, heritage, and the well-being of the residents). Geotourism also differentiates itself from ecotourism by focusing on the working landscape of the region. Geotourism is not bounded by a protected or pristine area, but ties sustainability to all aspects of the region. Even though the tourism literature is inundated with a variety of sustainable tourism definitions and niche segments like ecotourism, this analysis suggests that geotourism will emerge as a new way to view sustainable tourism. The clarity of the geotourism definition, its holistic nature and its measurability, provide academic researchers with a useable and defensible concept. In the world of tourism marketing, National Geographic gives recognition and powerful support to the concept of geotourism.

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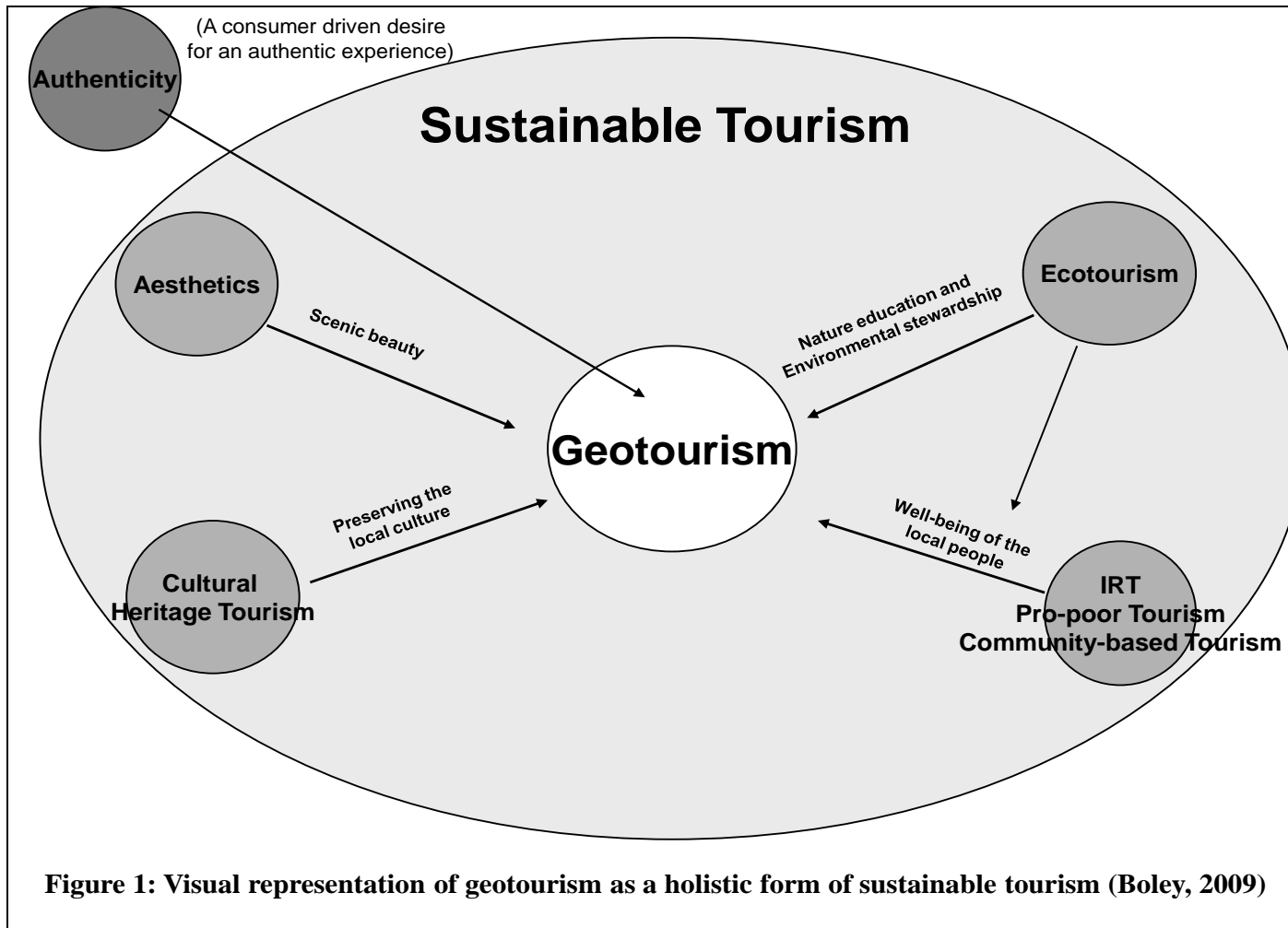


Figure 1: Visual representation of geotourism as a holistic form of sustainable tourism (Boley, 2009)