



Thriving Habitats: Sustainability in Wildlife Tourism Destinations

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Introduction

A disconnect currently exists between wildlife preservation and socio-economic concerns in countries where exotic animals are central to the tourism industry. Groups that wish to outlaw hunting fail to acknowledge the lives of the locals who are often hunting for their livelihoods. The first objective of this paper was to look at destinations around the world where wildlife is a draw for tourists. Locations examined within this paper include: Australia, Tanzania, Nepal, Cambodia, China, Guatemala and several more, all of which host wild animals that draw in tourists.

With several regions around the globe depending on specific animals being viewable by tourists, hunting and poaching these animals can have a detrimental effect on tourism to and within these areas. However, the lives of those living in villages and communities surrounding these animals' habitats must also be considered when determining lasting solutions for the environment and its people. Ecotourism, with its considerations to environmental, social, and economic state of a region, provides the balance needed moving forward.

Moorhouse, Dahlsjo, Baker, D'Cruze, and Macdonald (2015) estimate that global tourism accounts for 9% of global GDP with visits to wildlife tourist attractions potentially accounting for 20-40% of all tourism. Trave, Brunnschweiler, Sheaves, and Barnett (2017) estimate wildlife tourists ranging from 79 and 440 million with the number expected to double within 50 years. With many travelers including wildlife viewings in their itineraries and several countries depending on these attractions as main income generators, it is important to note which areas are visited due to wildlife and what animals are most sought after in those destinations. This paper seeks to provide an overview of these locations, citing destinations that were found throughout the research.

Following a synopsis of areas and animals that inhabit them, focus will turn to discuss animals' worth dead versus alive. Research in past and current programs aimed at reducing the number of animal deaths in these areas is also discussed, including legal restrictions, indirect and direct payments to individuals and communities, and establishing protected areas. The failures and successes each program experienced is then considered. Lastly, recommendations for future efforts are given. Within these recommendations, successful elements from the different programs are incorporated as well as characteristics from sound ecotourism.

Countries that seek a sustainable tourism industry require a strategy moving forward. It is by recognizing and respecting the connection between person, place, and animal that steps can be taken toward long-term sustainability in these, at times, delicate destinations. When balance is

attained, the environment is protected, animal populations are allowed to thrive, economies can stabilize and then grow, and human lives can be enhanced.

Literature Review

Wildlife Tourism Overview

Moorhouse et al. (2015) explain that in 2006, 43% of international visitors to Australia, approximately 2.2 million people, visited wildlife tourist attractions. Here, marine life is often the draw with shark cage-diving being a popular activity (Apps, Dimmock, & Huvneers 2018). In the Turks and Caicos Islands, the largest industry is tourism with diving being a main draw for visitors. In 1999, over 10,000 dives were recorded in a three month period in this region and the presence of a spiny lobster resulted in higher economic income (Rudd 2001).

South African animals remain to be vital to the country's tourism industry with lions, elephants, white rhinoceros, leopards, and buffalo included in the "Big Five" attracting hunters and tourists from around the world (The Big Five 2015). Weaver (2005) outlines several animals that are classified as "*charismatic megafauna*", meaning they hold great interest for humans, and notes which destinations they are found in. Giant pandas, found in the Sechuan province of China, orangutans found in Borneo, polar bears in Churchill, Manitoba, and koalas in Australia are among some of the species listed under this characterization.

The Value of Wildlife

Within the discussion on wildlife tourism is the question of how much an animal is worth and whether that value is higher when the animal is dead or alive. This speaks to values given to the animal either as a trophy following a hunt, its body parts following its poaching, or the income that can be generated over its lifespan when the animal is viewable by tourists. While this is difficult to estimate for all animals, the trade market and tourism draw on some, namely the Big Five, is pronounced enough that recent estimates are available for certain animals. The New York Times, in its article "The Big Five: Africa's Most Sought-After Trophy Animals", estimated a lion was worth \$8,000 to \$50,000 and an elephant was valued at \$25,000 to \$60,000. Leopards brought \$15,000 to \$35,000, buffalo trophies could bring \$12,500 to \$17,000, and white rhinoceros, prized over \$125,000 in South Africa (The Big Five 2015).

Phelan (2015) describes the poaching market for several endangered animals, elephants wanted for their tusks. In China, 2.2 pounds of elephant tusk garnered \$2,100 in 2014, despite ivory trading being banned in 1989. In 2012, 2.2 pounds of rhinoceros tusk sold for \$65,000, which Phelan (2015) explains made it worth more than gold, diamonds, and cocaine per pound. Tigers, sea turtles, lemurs, and gorillas are also poached for their skin or various body parts.

Alternatively, Honey (2008) explain that a lion is worth \$7,000 each year in tourism income with an elephant herd worth \$610,000 if viewable each year. Weaver (2005) echoes this value when stating a male lion was worth \$515,000 over its lifetime as a tourist attraction in the late 1970s. Honey (2008) also cite an Iceland study that found the whale watching industry to be worth \$1 billion worldwide. DeGregorio (2018) states that distinguished primatologist Jane Goodall believes chimpanzees can provide Uganda with tourism industry amounts similar to what the country brings in for gorilla trekking.

The World Wildlife Federation's 2017 Report states the Chitwan National Park in Nepal earns more than \$1.2 million per year from its wildlife tours. The report explains that Africa loses \$25 million every year due to elephant poaching. Beyond being a source of income for a country, wildlife tourism is crucial to employment in these regions that heavily depend on exotic animals. Tanzania's nature-based tourism industry supplies 1.2 million direct and indirect jobs and 190,000 people in Belize, half of its population, are supported by its nature-based tourism (WWF 2017).

In South Africa, wildlife tourism generated 15 times more jobs than cattle ranching (Honey 2008). Tisdell (2003) explains that even when a wildlife reserve operates at a loss, a result of low to zero entrance fees, the economic benefit it provides for the community through employment and other businesses support the maintaining of the reserve.

Wildlife Conservation Efforts

Different methods have been utilized in attempting to gain community support in keeping wild animals alive and preserving rich environments. The strategies researched include legal restrictions, indirect and direct payments to individuals and communities, and establishing protected areas. Each of these methods and their success are outlined below.

Stem, Lassoie, Lee, and Deshler (2003) found mixed reviews of conservation efforts in Costa Rica. While studying ecotourism's effect on hunting and deforestation, respondents stated that legal restrictions were more influential in reducing hunting rates than other measures taken. Of the people interviewed, 35.8% stated the law was the reason for the decrease in hunting over environmental awareness at 19.2% and tourism at 15.8%. However, hunting was less impacted by legal restrictions due to hunters being able to hide from law enforcement during the night hours.

Lindsey, Balme, Booth, and Midlane (2012) found that allowing hunting rates at sustainable levels was more beneficial to African countries than a complete ban on hunting lions. Several negative impacts could follow a ban on trophy hunting including: reduced tolerance for lions among local communities, reduced funds used for anti-poaching efforts as well as loss of income for locals.

Several studies of direct and indirect payments were examined. Eshoo, Johnson, Duangdala, and Hansel (2018) studied the effects of direct payments in Lao People's Democratic Republic.

Villages were rewarded financially when wildlife, namely carnivores, ungulates, and primates, were seen by tourists. More payments were given when more sightings occurred, discouraging hunting and poaching in the area. There was success in recording an increase in sightings by providing monetary incentives. However, the researchers state there were potentially other causes for increase in wildlife sightings, namely wild animals decreasing their fear of tourists, acclimating to their presence, and reduction in hunters due to increased tourism.

In Cambodia, researchers studied three different payment systems for biodiversity conservation, closely analyzing the effect a weak institution, specifically property rights, monitoring, governance, and enforcement, had on these programs (Clements, John, Nielsen, An, Tan, & Milner-Gulland 2010). The three programs studied included indirect community-based ecotourism system, indirect agri-environmental payment system, and a direct bird nest protection plan. In researching which was most effective in wildlife preservation, that study found all three programs delivered the same amount of income to village residents, amounting to \$120-\$160 per family, but found issues with all three programs. The most direct payment system, the bird nest protection plan, had greater impact initially on protecting bird habitats and required the least amount of funding, but the researchers concluded this type of system required a strong institution for long term success to be likely. Conservation efforts were not successfully encouraged in each individual within the village, rather those that received payments. The ecotourism and agri-environmental approaches were found to better encourage community-wide conservation efforts, but were less effective in the short term in accomplishing those goals. Only after several years were these two programs found successful in conservation. The initial investment for both programs was also higher than the direct payment option and required a \$50,000 investment per village to operate the program (Clements et al. 2010).

In their article “The Cost-Effectiveness of Conservation Payments”, Ferraro and Simpson (2002) found similar results to the study above in Cambodia when looking at direct and indirect payments for forest conservation. Within their findings, the authors reference systems established in other countries that similarly reward conservation efforts of locals. In the U.S., Costa Rica, and Brazil, the governments reward residents with tax breaks for their land conservation efforts. In Guatemala, direct payments are dispersed for land conservation and similar programs are used in El Salvador, Colombia, Honduras, and Panama. These references serve to establish a well-recognized pattern of providing monetary incentives for those protecting the environment, serving as a foundation for similar payments for wildlife preservation. Ferraro and Simpson (2002) concludes that an indirect payment strategy, like establishing ecotourism organizations or eco-friendly product production, is more expensive to carry out than a direct payment approach therefore, less effective at protecting land. A method that combines direct and indirect efforts is more expensive than a strict direct-payment-only approach. The authors admit direct payment approach is likely difficult to establish in low-income nations lacking structures for enforcing the program boundaries.

In a discussion on economic benefits of ecotourism and wildlife tourism, Tisdell (2003) questions benefits for locals when declaring protected areas. The author states that often local residents' have limited or prohibited access to land when included in conservation projects. Eliminating access to land they reside in, in an effort to preserve land and animals, does not address humanitarian concerns and will prove to be an unsustainable model moving forward.

The Potential for Ecotourism

Each method for preserving animal life and habitat lacks certain elements that keep it from fully succeeding in offering prolonged humanitarian and environmental protection. Whether its financial limitations or disregard for human life, no method is proven to be the best strategy. Stem et al. (2010), citing The International Ecotourism Society, state that ecotourism involves “responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and sustains the well-being of local people” (p. 323). It provide a framework needed to find balance to animal and human life, true ecotourism considers both priorities. Tisdell (2003) says “ecotourism provides direct financial support for nature conservation as well as for local communities where it occurs” (p. 83). Without local communities reaping benefits, there is no long-term conservation and “in the absence of local benefits, locals may feel morally justified in continuing to exploit resources in the protected area illegally” (p. 91).

Additional measures are needed to better ensure the future of wild species often hunted or poached. Certain tourism destinations depend heavily on the existence of unique species for significant income. Without these tourism draws, local residents stand to lose their economic well-being. Focus on future ecotourism efforts to ensure locals are not deprived of rights, provide for their families, and thriving capabilities.

Future Research

As echoed by Eshoo et al. (2018), it is evident that research is needed on long term solutions and rate of success for direct payment programs, providing economic stability to villages, while maintaining wildlife populations. Additionally, as described by Rudd (2001), more information is needed about tourist preferences. While Rudd explains this as necessary research for tropical reef ecosystems, it applies to tourist destinations in determining the non-consumptive value of animals, in an effort to protect valuable habitats. Regarding animal populations, further study is required to determine number of permits allowed without risking population decline or species endangerment.

Discussion and Recommendations

The elements proven crucial in an ecotourism approach to wildlife conservation and resident livelihood center around community and tourist education, organizational support, widespread financial benefits, and close tourism monitoring. Residents of the communities where wildlife

exists require education about the benefits in keeping animals alive. Clear communication is necessary for locals to fully understand why the future of tourism and its financial benefits to that area depend on the species being allowed to flourish. Animals deemed commercially unimportant are equally important, as ecosystems are delicate environments, dependent on all species (Tisdell 2003).

Special attention must be paid to the information that tourists are given about different animals and the need for conservation efforts, and visitor pre-arrival education ensures proper behaviors while in close proximity to wildlife. Adopt-an-animal programs should be encouraged where past visitors can continue to donate money for further protection of wildlife. There is potential for creating lasting impact on tourists with an enhanced visitor experience involving interactions with animals. Tisdell (2003) explains that when visitors could see the sea turtles being described, it consequently increased the value the tourists placed on those turtles, causing tourists to be more willing to donate. Likewise, Jane Goodall explains how people changed when allowed to look into the eyes of chimpanzees (Christ 2015). Apps et al. (2018) explain that when visitors were encouraged to emotionally connect with animals, it allowed changes in their environmental knowledge and attitude, contributing to their willingness to adopt new environmentally-beneficial practices. When efforts can be made to safely allow for interaction between visitor and animal, there is higher lasting positive impact on the preservation of the animal and emotional connection.

The need for an established institution is noted in tourism areas where wildlife preservation is desired. The establishing and enforcement of property rights is paramount within these institutional measures, including governing bodies in remote villages or communities. This further encourages the democratic principles within ecotourism, and ensures locals have fair representation in decision-making. Trusted organizations should work with locals, developing guidelines for residents to live by, promoting the village's well-being and the natural habitats. In connection with educational elements, established governing bodies are responsible for future guideline adjustments.

Financial benefits must be wide-spread in the communities as well. When only certain individuals receive financial benefits it does not amount to community-wide support for the program. This lack of consensus can lead to division and distrust. Only when financial benefits are well established, understood, and believed to be beneficial will all residents work towards securing the continuation of those benefits. In order to guarantee that all residents can benefit from financial compensation for preservation, democratic voting should take place on appropriate amounts that can support the community members well. If amounts are too low, illegal hunting, poaching, and breaking of established guidelines will surely follow when there is a lack of effective legal measures.

Within the financial benefit is an allowance for hunting of certain animals once past a certain age. Following their study of African lions, Lindsey et al. (2012) state the use of age-based quotas would allow for sustainability once a certain lion population was reached. Legal hunting of animals that maintain an abundance can allow for additional income for residents without the threat of losing entire species. This element requires close monitoring of population size, which although is an additional cost for the region, can create more jobs and encourage responsible conservation practices throughout the country.

Tourism must also be closely monitored to ensure animal safety and habitat protection. Measures should be taken in all areas to limit the impact wild animals endure from visitors. As Marchland et al. (2014) explain in their study on mouflon, a type of wild sheep, animal behaviors can be heavily influenced by the presence of humans. In the study, the Mediterranean mouflon altered their daytime and nighttime activities based on the human behaviors the animals detected. Following the results of that study, it is also recommended that animal breeding times and regular habits be taken into consideration when establishing tourist activities.

Conclusion

Implementation of elements within an ecotourism approach to wildlife tourism is key in creating a lasting habitat for wildlife, ensuring future social and economic benefits for communities hosting unique species. By considering human, animal, and environment perspectives, lasting measures are taken. Research is required, and each destination should be assessed based on specific needs and limitations. No two countries or regions are alike in animals and people they house, tourists visits, or the environment contained within their borders. Careful consideration, representative policies, and close monitoring of impacts of tourism, destinations around the world move closer in attaining long-lasting wildlife tourism industries.

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