Final Project – Ecotourism and BC First Nations

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Introduction

Tourism, which is defined by United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) as the traveling and staying in places outside of one's usual environment for no more than a year, has become a major player on the economic stage. With tourism generating more than $1.3trillion in 2012 (World Tourism Organization, 2013) it surpasses that of oil exports, food products or automobiles. With this growth has come the development of a number of "niche" markets, one of which is ecotourism.

Ecotourism can be defined as responsible travel to fragile, pristine and usually protected areas with the following goals in mind:

- Educate the traveler
- Provide funds for conservation
- Directly benefits the economic development and political empowerment of local communities
- Fosters respect for different cultures and human rights (Weaver, 2001)

This form of tourism goes beyond "sustainable" or "nature" tourism, "striving to respect and benefit protected areas as well as the people living around or on these lands" (Honey, 2008) which primarily corresponds to Indigenous Peoples. While honorable in its goals, ecotourism has been picked up by the travel industry as an excellent marketing tool, used to attract environmentally and socially conscious travellers. The International Ecotourism Society (TIES), the worlds first ecotourism organization, attempts to provide industry standards, guidelines, and support,

however a spectrum exists within ecotourism operators, from "soft, ecotourism lite" to true ecotourism ventures.

Canada is among the countries that are now marketing themselves ecotourism destinations. For this paper, I will be focusing on ecotourism opportunities in British Columbia, specifically in connection to First Nations. I will start by establishing the context of Ecotourism in BC, followed by an investigation of the benefits and threats that ecotourism poses to local First Nations, and conclude with a look at implications for practice as I incorporate Aboriginal Tourism into the Ecotourism class at the high school level.

Ecotourism in BC

"This spectacular province is home to our people who have preserved our way of life. We are proud of our culture and heritage and most importantly we want to share it with the world. We want to celebrate the fact that we're still here." (Aboriginal Tourism BC, 2013).

The Aboriginal Tourism Association is a non-profit organization that supports Aboriginal tourism ventures in B.C. Their mission is "to contribute to the preservation of Aboriginal culture and advancement of economic development through support, facilitation and promotion of the growth and sustainability of a quality and culturally rich Aboriginal tourism industry in British Columbia."

(Aboriginal Tourism Association of BC, 2013). It is perhaps through the goals of their Authentic Experiences Program that it is most evident that Aboriginal Tourism aligns with the values of Ecotourism. While their goal of "heightening the awareness and understanding of respectful and appropriate Aboriginal tourism experiences" (Aboriginal Tourism Association of BC, 2013) only parallels three of the goals of ecotourism, it will be argued that the fourth, *provide funds for conservation*, occurs indirectly as natural resources will ultimately be preserved for the authenticity of the ecotourism activity.

It is however important to note the Aboriginal Tourism Association does not represent all of Indigenous tourism taking place within BC. Indigenous tourism can be defined as all tourism in which Indigenous Peoples are directly involved through either direct control of the business or by having their culture serve as the attraction (Hartmen, 2013). Two prime examples in which Indigenous tourism that does not align with Ecotourism would be casinos and golf courses found on reserve land.

Benefits of Ecotourism

*"Ecotourism affords First Nations communities a chance to educate visitors in their culture and history, which aids in the breaking down of stereotypes. It also affords new economic ventures coming from sustainable use of land and natural resources." (*Tourism British Columbia, 2011)

When considering the history of tourism, Indigenous peoples have not faired well. Previously, their involvement was typically involuntary, their culture was commodified, their sacred sites and environment were damaged, and they themselves were observed in zoo-like conditions (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2009). However the rise of Ecotourism and the shift of control in tourism ventures into the hands of the Aboriginal people have helped to change that. When done correctly, Ecotourism has a number of benefits for First Nations communities including education, economy and infrastructure, and preservation of culture.

The capacity to which Ecotourism can educate non-Indigenous people is multi-faceted. Not only does it educate about culture and history, but an environmental ethic and sustainability as well. As the quote at the beginning of this section indicates, the ideal of Ecotourism is that learning about First Nation culture and history, will move visitors beyond the stereotypes to a place of deeper understanding. This understanding of the culture should in turn foster a respect for these people who have so often been placed in a marginalized position within the dominant Western society. "If we have something as valuable as the Potlatch Collection and if we want people to come understand it and respect it, we have to invite them to come visit us" (Aboriginal Tourism BC, 2010).

From an environmental standpoint, Aboriginal tourism has the potential to educate and transform Western ways of thinking to one that is more holistic. Western thinking has a tendency to be compartmentalized and broken down into subcomponents with the environment being viewed by frameworks of objectivity,

'expert' analysis, indicator species, and personal entitlement. Whereas Indigenous Peoples hold knowledge of life systems, interconnectedness and human behavior being synchronized with sacred principles (Grimwood, 2009). "Traditionally, indigenous peoples have a special relationship to what we would call the environment, and some advocated that sharing their knowledge trough the ecotourism encounter can foster more benign and sustainable lifestyles" (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2009).

Where conventional tourism tends to be controlled by outside parties, with profits leaving the community for large corporations, ecotourism ventures are operated and controlled by local stakeholders, with profits remaining in the community. First Nations stand to gain economically from tourism opportunities that stem from local enterprises, local employment, fees for licensing or entrance into certain areas, as well as the sale of goods and services (Lemelin & Dickson, 2012). Development of tourism in communities can also lead to growth in tourism related infrastructure, which in turn can benefit the local people as well.

Perhaps the most important benefit of ecotourism is its capacity to help revive a culture that Western society had previously tried to extinguish. The U'mista promotional video points out that the singing and dancing performed at their cultural center was declared a criminal offense by the early Canadian government from 1881 to 1952 (Aboriginal Tourism BC, 2010). Ecotourism can provide a mechanism in which a community can redevelop a pride in Aboriginal heritage and

identity. "One important thing about tourism and the First Nations, it's a way that we preserve our culture because when you have to speak about it and share it, you have to know it. " Dr. Linnea Battel, Xa:ytem Longhouse Interpretive Center (Aboriginal Tourism BC, 2010). Xat'sull Heritage village near Williams Lake has allowed a reconnection with culture for many of its community members. Tourist demand for traditional items such as homespun fabric has recatalyzed the creation of these objects and the desire for performances of dance and music have caused old traditions to be revived (Hartmen, 2013).

"The art is actually the only visual language that we have. And in the traditional times every living person of that time period knew the imager and knew the story that went with the imagery and they understood the role of the art and the art was a reflection of culture. So the art was the catalyst in remembering the story. "
Robert Davidson, Master Carver, Haida Gwaii (Aboriginal Tourism BC, 2010).

Downfalls of Ecotourism

Although the travel industry did not originate the concept of ecotourism, it quickly adopted it, mainstreamed it – and watered it down. The tourism industry, including the travel press, has come to view "green travel" as a marketing tool to attract the growing number of environmentally and socially conscious travelers seeking alternatives to conventional "mass tourism". (Honey, 2008)

While Ecotourism is honorable in its intentions, it is ultimately an economic venture and is thus highly susceptible to erosion of its core values. The commodification of culture that is so common in traditional tourism can creep into ecotourism experiences as well. In the book *Is the Sacred for Sale? Tourism and Indigenous Peoples,* Johnston argues that ecotourism is the single greatest threat to Indigenous Peoples. "Shielded by global doctrines of biodiversity conservation, the ecotourism industry creeps into the deepest recesses of culture and community life, and violates the full spectrum of Indigenous rights, culture and spirituality" (Grimwood, 2009). While set up to encourage conservation and protection of pristine and fragile environments, park and reserve have the potential to limit access and self-determination on traditional lands.

There is also a concern that the commodification of traditional arts will lead to an abandonment of traditional occupations and a gradual cultural drift as they shift towards producing items for tourist consumption (Hartmen, 2013). For instance, as time is shifted to carving masks, less time may be given to hunting or fishing. This can also act as an inhibitor to the natural evolution First Nation culture, effectively fossilizing the culture into a form that is "ideal for the tourist". Commodification can also act to dilute the culture in order to produce a "familiar or safe" experience for the tourist (Hottola, 2010). For instance in Southern Alberta, 'native cuisine' scored the lowest interest rank amongst the visitors, and so there has been a shift away from some traditional foods, towards the "safe" tourist food. Even at Xat'sull Heritage Village, they have adopted certain historically inaccurate representations,

such as teepees imported from Alberta, for marketing purposes. This interaction between the desires of Western tourists and First Nation communities is likely to result in more or less inevitable hybridization of local values and practices (Hottola, 2010).

In recent literature there has been caution raised about viewing Indigenous Peoples as "noble savages or arch conservationists" (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2009). While Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) can be used by scientists to help solve biological and ecological problems (Snively & Corsiglia, 2001), Aboriginal Australian academic Bayet states "Aboriginal people are looking for alternatives for land management, which will meet their traditional obligations, as well as the constraints of contemporary survival (via Higgins-Desbiolles, 2009). The Western-centric view of ecological stewardship is different than that of Indigenous views, thus to set them up as "arch conservationists" in a Western sense, is to essential set them up for criticism and failure in the eyes of Western society.

Applications at the High school level

Because of the educational nature of ecotourism, it is an area that lends itself well to the classroom. I have the privilege of teaching an Ecotourism 11 class at the high school level, which is in its second year of development. As is common in newly developed courses, it is in a constant state of evolution as we interact with the material and become aware of more of the issues surrounding the field of

ecotourism. Broadly speaking the course is divided into 4 units; Concepts of Ecotourism, Ecotourism in Chilliwack, Ecotourism in BC, and Ecotourism Globally. There is a strong focus on Aboriginal Tourism in both the "Chilliwack" and "BC" chapters. My work within the ETEC 521 course and on this particular paper have reaffirmed by belief that *Ecotourism 11* has valuable potential for education students, and I will finish here with what I see to be the two most important implications for practice; avoidance of stereotypes and the importance of situating their learning.

There is as much diversity amongst Indigenous Peoples as there are Indigenous people. Even within the various First Nations groups in B.C., there are countless traditions and customs each unique and tied to the land in which those people inhabit. In our investigation of various ecotourism ventures in B.C. it will be important to avoid generalizations or stereotyping. Strategies for this could include:

- Invite an elder from the local community come to frame our knowledge of the Sto:lo history in the Chilliwack area.
- Invite of First Nations people involved in ecotourism ventures into the class in order to talk to specific ecotourism ventures and how it impacted their community.
- In situations where it is not possible to have someone come to our class (due to distance, availability etc) students learn about the First Nation group before they analyze a specific ecotourism venture occurring within that community.

As both an Ecotourism and Biology teacher, I see the incredible asset that the First Nations way of knowing provides us. In a highly technologized world, the importance of being able to step back into nature and recognize the interconnectedness of all things will be invaluable as we seek to solve a number of our upcoming challenges (climate change, desertification etc). Findings indicate that students are more likely to understand the natural world if they work directly with natural phenomena, using their senses and using instruments to extend the power of their senses (Haury, 1933). The implication of this are two fold, students need to learn ecotourism not from inside the classroom but by getting out into the environment where these ventures to take place. There is obviously a cost (financial and time) challenge to this, but whenever possible, student learning should be tied to the place in which it occurs. Secondly I need to help foster a holistic view of the ecotourism ventures. Rather than having students evaluating the activity alone, they must investigate how that activity is interconnected with other factors in that community.

Conclusion

While ecotourism offers a marked improvement over conventional tourism, it still poses challenges for Indigenous populations. Ecotourism has the potential to benefit Indigenous peoples through preservation of culture and traditional lands, empowerment, economic stimulus and education of Western society in the

Indigenous ways of thinking. However it also has the potential to erode or fossilize culture, restrict Indigenous peoples from their traditional lands, and cause cultural drift through commodification. As this niche market grows, it will be important to involve the primary stakeholders, the Indigenous Peoples, in the decisions and control of each and every venture. It is my hope that through Ecotourism 11, students will develop a broader and more sensitive understanding of what's to gain/at-stake for the Indigenous Peoples that are involved in ecotourism ventures.

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