

Responsible, eco- or maybe sustainable?

About the confusion in defining the tourism that we want

Christian Baumgartner

When I teach Sustainable Tourism, it seems that for the students one of the most difficult things to understand is the difference between ecotourism and sustainable tourism. Nevertheless the explanation sounds easy: Ecotourism is another form of tourism, like beach tourism, cruise tourism, culture tourism, etc. and Sustainable Tourism is a vision, a demand for all forms of tourism.

But it is not so easy as it sounds, especially if other terms like responsible tourism, nature based tourism, pro poor tourism, community based tourism, etc. enter the stage as well.

Ecotourism or Responsible Tourism?

There are so many definitions of ecotourism that the Australian researcher Figgis declared ecotourism defining has “been nominated an Olympic sport”! Each varies subtly according to a range of political, economic and environmental agendas. The roots of ecotourism are based in the 60ies of the last century when any ‘any tourism going to protected areas was called ecotourism’ without taking any social or environmental impacts into account. In 1990 The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) was founded and TIES defined ecotourism as “responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people.” Later – as a result of the International Year of Ecotourism 2002 – also UNWTO and UNEP tries to create a unitarily accepted definition. This new approach was also based on responsible travelling and integrated also learning elements of the tourism activities.

But how could tourism – a business sector – be responsible? Or in other words: Can we expect or demand that an industry changes to be ‘good’?

Following the approach of the ICRT (International Centre for Responsible Tourism) Responsible Tourism is about making “better places for people to live, and better places for people to visit” (following Harold Goodwin, the director of the ICRT). So Responsible Tourism is rather an ethical claim, a call for altruistic behavior of the business sector than a concrete concept that leads to clear requirements and frameworks. It is therefore a bit like the current concept of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR).

But unfortunately the business world is not altruistic. If we want to create substantial changes we need more than ethics. As long as CSR stays a ‘volunteer action that goes beyond legal requirements’, it is still just a sample of frontrunners – partly the real good guys, sometimes also for poor marketing advantages – that implement serious measures of improvement.

Want to have an example?

It is an accepted fact that we need to change the CO₂ emissions caused by air traffic. CO₂ compensation is an appropriate tool that at least avoids the same amount of emissions in other places than caused by travelling. But at the moment less than 1% of the air tickets are compensated, tour operators are not willing to include the price of compensation into the package prices. As long as there is no legal requirement (kerosene taxation, CO₂ taxes, automatic compensation of air tickets, etc.) the situation will not change.

Altruistic, ethical behavior is an adequate demand rather for private persons than for the industry. Consumers can make relevant decisions and at the end put huge pressure on the industry, buy buying better, healthier, more sustainable products. According to the Otto Group Trendstudy in 2011 72% of all consumers said, that ethical criteria got a part of their buying decisions. And only 34% of the buyers today trust companies in general, but 77% trust companies, which produce ‘ethically correct’ products. This opens a huge market also for the tourism industry.

And what’s the different approach of Sustainable Tourism?

Sustainable Tourism is basically a demand for all different forms of tourism, not only for single forms like ecotourism and it is not only claiming on volunteer actions like responsible tourism but it strives for legal regulations.

The implementation of Sustainable Tourism calls e.g. for new subvention policies, clear investment regulations, effective EIAs (Environmental Impact Assessment), broad implementation of the cost-by-cause principle, etc.

Therefore Sustainable Tourism is a theoretical approach with very practical consequences directed to the policy makers and the tourism businesses.

Does ecotourism develop towards sustainability?

The answer is a clear ‘Yes and No’.

On the one hand everything that seems to be a little bit green is marketed as ecotourism – be it solar panels at the hotel roof (which is a cost saving measure), whale watching (which is not necessarily done in a eco-sound way) or short national park trips to Costa Rica (causing a lot of emissions).

But on the other hand clear and comprehensive criteria were developed, e.g. by the Romanian Ecotourism Association (AER). Recently the 2nd European Ecotourism Conference in Brasov (RO) in 2013 developed criteria for ‘ecotourism destination’, at the end adopted by AER, the Europarc Federation, Naturefriends International and others.

Both approaches do take more and more criteria of Sustainable Tourism into account.

So for a conclusion that tries to decrease the amount of confusion about all those terms we could state that ...

- Ecotourism is a form of tourism that partly goes into the direction of more sustainability,
- Responsible Tourism should be directed towards consumers and
- Sustainable Tourism is a goal for all forms of tourism that needs and demands legal and structural implementation.

Christian Baumgartner

Secretary General of Naturefriends International

www.nf-int.org, christian.baumgartner@nf-int.org