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(Review Article)

The Role of Environmental Ethics in Sustainable Tourism Development

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Abstract

Background: Today, tourism is recognized as one of the largest and fastest growing industries which has been highly regarded by governments for its diverse benefits, including job creation, increasing local and national revenues, expanding entrepreneurial opportunities, making optimal economic investment, and improving the security by reducing political tensions. Nevertheless, tourism can have various economic, social, and cultural consequences on the environment and local communities. Therefore, there are serious ethical considerations in terms of environmental degradation and negative social and cultural impacts of tourism that need to be taken into account in tourism development programs. The aim of this research is to study the role of environmental ethics in sustainable tourism development and provide ethical environmental solutions in the development of tourism.

Conclusion: Considering the fact that, in most cases, few may benefit from tourism development, while its adverse effects influence the society and the environment, ethical solutions such as understanding the real values of nature, assessing the environmental and social impacts of tourism development plans, estimating the carrying capacity of the destination, focusing on sustainable forms and alternative tourism, and establishment of effective laws and regulations are required for a more sustainable and ethical tourism development.

Keywords: Environmental ethics, Tourism, Sustainable development

Introduction

Today, tourism is recognized as one of the largest and fastest growing industries of the world (1). This phenomenon has been highly regarded by governments for its diverse benefits, including job creation, increasing local and national revenues, expanding opportunities for optimal economic investment, and improving the security by reducing political tensions. The global revenue of the tourism sector ranks second after oil industry (2).

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As a result of the increasing of leisure times, emergence of new forms of media, transportation development and the change in the structure of population especially in the western countries, the demand for tourism is increasing globally. This growth has led to a significant influence on the economies of the destination countries (3).

While figures on employment and economic growth caused by tourism are very promising, they should not be treated superficially (4). In fact, tourism is capable of creating various economic, social, cultural and ethical consequences and conflicts in the destination areas (5, 6).

Regarding the vast and often unknown impacts of tourism on the natural and socio-economic environments, it can be said that tourism is not the so-called clean and savior industry that everyone thinks. Along with environmental degradations, such as pollutions imposed to air, water, soil, landscape etc., it causes displacement of local people, unfair labor situations, disrespecting indigenous cultures, and many other violations of human rights(7). Often, the economic benefits of tourism are the result of the costs imposed on the environment and the local community, which ultimately endanger the assets of tourism industry that are, natural and cultural attractions. In addition, tourism, is an industry which highly depends on nature and common pool resources, in which problem of over use and congestion may adversely affect the life of local people and the environment.

Although this issue cannot be generalized to all types of tourism, but it makes us revise the benefits of tourism and reflects the need for a comprehensive and preventive approach about the possible consequences of this phenomenon on the people, economies and ecosystems that the industry depends on(8).

Therefore, it seems that not everyone benefits from tourism developments, but its adverse effects influence the society and the environment, which raise this question that whether the present trend of tourism development is a correct and accepted issue in terms of ethics, or serious considerations should be taken into account. Or simply, what are the ethics for tourism developments?

Environmental Ethics and Tourism

Obviously, any kind of development will bring about changes in the environment on which industrial and economic growth depends. But in order to achieve the desired future for the present and future generations, it is necessary to pay enough attention to the principles of sustainable development and environmental protection.

Until the early 1990s, little attention was paid to the role of ethics in the tourism industry. In this decade, the use of this category in trade and then tourism was considered (9). In general, ethics is defined as the difference between what a person has or does not have the right to do. In fact, the right behavior, which is often dictated by the society, is an action taken in response to a particular situation and has the greatest benefit and least harm for all affected individuals (10). Because of the proximity of tourism to nature and the environment, one of the branches of ethics that has direct application in the field of tourism is environmental ethics (9). By definition, environmental ethics, which is one of the divisions of applied ethics, is "the study of human relationships with all that is part of the environment"(11). This category includes studying the moral relationships between humans and the natural environment, including inhuman organisms that constitute this environment. Its main topics are: What is the proper method for understanding the relationship between man and the natural environment? What values are part of that relationship or come from it? Which principles and rules of action justify the nature of these goods and values? And how people should interact with the natural environment (and the inhuman ones in which they exist? (12). Obviously, like any other intervention, if it is accompanied by planning and with special attention to environmental and social considerations, tourism development can bring the least cost and adverse effects, along with benefits and positive points. This is in line with sustainable development, which seeks to establish intergenerational justice and is an ethical issue.

According to views of some researchers, sustainable development means maintaining a resource for current and future uses and a type of exploita-

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tion that in the long term does not result in the destruction and loss of that resource (13). Thus, sustainability is a globally accepted notion that puts limits to unleashed growth and pressure over natural capitals that should be preserved for the future generations. In tourism sector, sustainability depends closely on the state of the natural and social/cultural environments of destinations especially in developing countries where the tourism industry is growing rapidly (14).

In order to achieve sustainable tourism development, which is therefore considered a more ethical approach, several steps should be taken which are mentioned in the following section.

Identifying the true value of nature

Undoubtedly, the perception of the environment and the position that humans consider for themselves in the nature, affects the value and the type of behaviors they chose to have towards it. In fact, superior and opportunistic valuing systems towards nature have caused enormous environmental problems that the modern society is facing today. Therefore, we need to adopt a new way in humans' interactions with the nature to solve these problems.

Since tourism is a human phenomenon, this question arises that how the relationship between tourism and the environment is represented by the value of nature for the tourists and the stake holders. The values of nature are more than just the economic enterprises such as of tourism and also include scientific, historical, cultural, and so on. In modern times that the changes to our environment makes us reassess our position towards nature, as a subsystem of the community, tourism also sets its own position to better reflect ethical considerations, priorities, and ethical issues(15).

Environmental Impact Assessment

Any human intervention and activities in the environment causes different degrees of unwanted negative effects. In some cases, because of the type of activity and the direct effects which appear sooner in the environment, the consequences are clearer and more familiar. But tourism is among interventions that in addition to direct effects have indirect implications which appear in the long run. However, in many developing countries, the dominant attitude towards the tourism industry is an activity in line with sustainable development with slight negative impacts.

It is crystal clear that satisfaction of the quality of a destination is highly dependent on environmental characteristics, such as beautiful landscape, quietness, cleanliness, pleasant weather, etc.(16). Therefore, the ongoing trend of tourism development will cause a serious reduction in the quality of destination and thus declines the demand for travel and threatens the future of this industry. In addition to reducing the quality of the environment for the local residents, this phenomenon leads to the deprivation of future generations of many of tourist attractions.

So, there should be a systematic approach to identify, prevent or reduce these consequences in order to achieve sustainable development and equity for different places and generations. Environmental Impact Assessment, which is a systematic tool for predicting and reducing negative impacts both on natural and cultural environment, should be applied in order to conduct tourism development in a more ethical manner.

Estimation of the Carrying Capacity

Excessive use of resources, regardless of their capacity and ability to be renewed, cause irreparable harm to them which would be far from intergenerational equity and, consequently, from ethical development. Tourism carrying capacity means establishing a balance between the physical environment and the quality of the tourists' experience. In addition to having a good economic profit, such an approach also does not affect the status of the environment and the perceived experience of tourists. This equilibrium means achieving the carrying capacity which is defined as the maximum number of people who can use a site without making unacceptable changes in the physical environment and reducing the quality of the visitors' experience (17).

Effective regulations

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Since the environment is considered as the main capital and a key element for tourism, environmental protection can lead to the prosperity of this industry. But since tourists are not permanent residents, they may feel that they will not be responsible of environmental degradation they cause. Therefore, the local community and the natural environment can be harmed by this irresponsibility, which is not an ethical issue. Therefore, it is vital to set up effective laws and regulations to prevent the destruction of the environment by tourists.

Considering the local community

At first glance, it seems that tourism has a lot of economic benefits for local people, including increased job opportunities and income generation. However, experience has shown that most of the jobs created are seasonal, with low income; almost no training provided and have no guarantee to continue and provide health insurance services. Furthermore, the attractions of employment in the tourism industry leads to the withdrawal of labor from other economic sectors resulting in the destruction of the prospects for growth and employment in other economic sectors in the region. Also, an important part of the tourism revenue and its potential investments leaks outside of the region, because the main owners and players in the tourism sector are not often in the region (8).

In addition to the above mentioned tourism development in remote areas leads to rising of land prices which eventually eliminates jobs that generate less income from the land, such as agriculture, gardening or fishery. Therefore, the local people's ability to own land will be reduced and gradually become marginalized and poorer (18).

Thus, there should be sufficient guarantees in tourism development plans that firstly, they will not reduce the income of local people and eliminate small businesses and work force will be provided from local people while providing sufficient training. Secondly, land price should be prevented from rising and as much as possible.

Mass Tourism Considerations

Among the many different recreational activities, mass tourism is known to be responsible for environmental degradation associated with tourism. This category of tourism is inherently against sustainable tourism. Although it can take a more sustainable and responsible form of the current state, little research has been done to achieve this goal and researchers are more interested in conducting surveys of newer forms of tourism such as ecotourism or other forms alternative tourism. That's the reason why negative impacts of mass tourism on sustainable development have sometimes been ignored. This is an important research topic which requires immediate attention from researchers and practitioners (8).

Conclusion

In the past few decades, the tourism industry has expiries an excessive growth and become one of the fastest growing economic sectors and one of the most important actors in international trade (19). However, tourism is not the clean industry that many policymakers and ordinary people imagine. As a result of the close relationship with the natural environment and the local community, it can bring about deleterious effects which may remain hidden from the eye. Often, the economic benefits of tourism are the result of the costs imposed the environment and societies, which eventually jeopardizes tourism industry assets which are natural and cultural attractions(8).

This is a bitter reality that the benefits of tourism industry cannot be gained by all but its negative impacts affect everyone and also the natural environment, which is not off course ethically correct. Thus, in order to solve these problems, certain mechanisms are needed to be taken by the society and authorities to control and mitigate these effects. In this research, after introducing the ethical aspects of tourism, some measures for reducing and controlling the negative effects of tourism were reviewed and introduced, so that the industry can move towards social and environmental equity and, ultimately, be ethical.

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Ethical Consideration

Ethical issues (Including plagiarism, informed consent, misconduct, data fabrication and/or falsification, double publication and/or submission, redundancy, etc.) have been completely observed by the authors.

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