

Anthropology and Ecotourism in European Wetlands: Bubbles, Babies and Bathwater

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Abstract

Recent literature, particularly in social anthropology, has focussed on ‘bursting the bubble’ of ecotourism, arguing that it has become a meaningless umbrella term for too many practices that are essentially ‘irresponsible’ in their nature. This article proposes that, although scepticism is entirely appropriate, such arguments cannot be allowed to negate the value of ecotourism entirely. Based on research conducted in three European wetlands of marginal economic status in Greece, Lithuania and Romania, this article proposes a typology of models – of ecotourism, sustainable tourism, and responsible tourism – that helps to differentiate ‘practice’ from ‘good practice’. The research highlights the importance of local people’s discourse on ecotourism, which in this case was seen not only as an economic activity but as an aspirational moral virtue concerned with tidiness and maintaining the beauty of nature. Anthropology *for* ecotourism, which takes local people’s views and opinions into account in the search for appropriate forms of tourism development that can transform people’s lives and environments for the better, is as important as the anthropology *of* ecotourism.

Key words: Ecotourism, wetland environments, responsible tourism, sustainable tourism, Europe, Lithuania, Greece, Romania

Shortened version of title for running head: Ecotourism in European Wetlands

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Introduction

In accepting many of the criticisms of ecotourism – that it is too often a ‘bubble’ (carrier and Macleod 2005), that it has become an umbrella term for too many practices that are essentially ‘irresponsible’ in their nature (Russell and Wallace 2004) - we are in danger of ‘throwing the baby out with the bathwater’ if we go on to assume that nothing done in the name of ecotourism is of value to conservation or society. This article seeks to counteract some of the blanket criticisms of ecotourism that have been made in social anthropology by presenting a typology of models – of ecotourism, sustainable tourism and responsible tourism - that helps to differentiate what is practice from what is good practice. Based on field research conducted in three protected wetland sites around Europe, it argues that, while scepticism about the use of the term ‘ecotourism’ is in order, such an attitude should not be allowed to obscure the real and potential value of *some* forms of ecotourism, specifically responsible tourism. Each of the three sites studied - Lake Kerkini in Greece, the Nemunas Delta in Lithuania, and the Danube Delta, Romania – are important areas of biodiversity that also support significant human populations. This article examines how ecotourism and the potential for ecotourism was perceived by the local inhabitants in each of the wetland sites covered, and highlights the importance of including all three ‘corners’ of the responsible tourism enterprise – hosts, guests, and environment – in any development of tourism that also seeks to promote conservation.

The research on which this article is based took place under the auspices of a larger project, the Integrated Management of European Wetlands (IMEW), funded by the European Commission.¹ The research presented here took place as part of Work Package 5 (WP5), which was charged with considering the current situation and potential pathways to the

development of responsible tourism in the wetland areas involved. The rationale for the study was that the development of this form of tourism is important for the continued protection of the wetlands and the support of local economies. WP5 looked at the relationships and perceptions of “hosts and guests” (Smith 1989), and sought to answer the question of whether appropriate forms of tourism development can help promote environmental conservation. The answer presented here, not unequivocally, is ‘yes’.

Anthropology of ecotourism : anthropology for ecotourism

Ecotourism as a term has its origins in the 1980s and 1990s as an alternative to the negative social, economic and environmental effects of ‘mass tourism’ (Graburn 1995: 162). As a foil to the latter, there was a tendency for ecotourism to come to stand for everything that mass tourism was not, and thus as a concept it has grown rapidly and developed multiple meanings. The Ecotourism Society (1991) has one of the most holistic definitions of ecotourism, in its definition of it as ‘responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people’. Yet too often ecotourism is used as a catch-all phrase that is applied to almost anything that links tourism and Nature: tours that involve looking at trees or animals; holidays with a hunting or fishing element; staying in hotels that are based on ecologically conservative principles; visits to rural areas or farms; eating ‘natural’ products – all these can be (and often are) found sheltering under the increasingly large and fashionable umbrella of ‘ecotourism’. In other words, the practice of ecotourism may well bear no relation to the laudable environmental and social goals set out for it by organizations such as the Ecotourism Society. It has become, as Gray (2003:113) puts it, “an ambiguous term that allows actors to speak the same language while pursuing different objectives.”

Ecotourism has been similarly criticized (by Carrier and Macleod 2005: 316) for being a term “so elastic that it may be close to meaningless”. They also conceptualize an ‘ecotourism bubble’, in which the often harmful contexts of ecotourism practice can be ignored. For example, the hidden environmental costs of much ecotourism (such as the CO₂ emissions from the big jets used to carry international tourists to their ecotouristic destinations) are rightly questioned by Carrier and Macleod, among others. But not all ecotourists are of the intercontinental elite variety. Furthermore, irrespective of the socio-cultural and environmental contexts within which ecotourists visit a place, once they are there certain forms of tourism practice will be more valuable for tourists, local people and the environment than others. It is irresponsible for Carrier and Macleod to ‘burst the bubble’ of ecotourism if this is to deny the validity of any kind of ecotourism altogether. Critical examination of the meaning and philosophical underpinnings of concepts such as ecotourism is a useful corrective to unreflective research and practice, but following on from their critiques researchers need to get off the fence and take a stance on what types of tourism are better or worse than others, and why.

Fortunately we do not need to delve very far into the fields of economics and ethics to understand what these types might be. One major problem with most large-scale tourism is ‘leakage’, where money spent by international tourists on holiday in the developing world ends up in developed countries, or by national (and international) tourists benefiting major entrepreneurs and companies who are external to a region and siphon all profit from the enterprise out of the region. The amount of leakage varies by country – the World Bank estimates it is around 40% for India, 60% in Thailand, 70% for Kenyan beach holidays and up to 80% in the Caribbean (Mann 2000). As Tom Selwyn (2001), writing recently about the development of tourism and the anthropology of tourism in Bosnia-Herzegovina, puts it:

There is widespread feeling...that international programmes having anything to do with economic development need underpinning by principles of 'fair trade' rather than by uncritical notions of 'free trade'...There is little point in BiH becoming a preserve for large European tour operators. There is more support for the view that the industry [tourism] should make a contribution to employment generation at very local levels (Selwyn 2001).

The crucial issue in tourism ethics, as Prosser argues, is “to maintain control and autonomy in handling the scale and character of tourism and evaluating the role it is to play in development policies” (1990:50; cf. Eadington and Smith 1992:3).

We might also wish to consider socio-economic inequities in travel and modes of travel at the international level. Foreign travel is still very much an elite activity. In 1996, only 3.5% of the world's total population travelled abroad, 80% of them from 17 European nations, the USA, Canada or Japan. There are many types within the category of 'elite traveller'. Evidence suggests that a policy of promoting only the upper, luxury travel end of the market, unless it is very carefully managed, is more likely to lead to leakage than a policy of providing cheaper accommodation that is better controlled by local people. 'Backpacker' tourists, while much maligned for the limited amounts of money they are likely to spend, are more likely to use and respond positively to the sorts of facilities that local people are able to provide. On the other hand, international tourists of all sorts are more liable to be influenced by the changing fashions and geo-political tensions, prompting Bhattarai et al (2005) to suggest that a country such as Nepal would do better to develop regional pilgrimage tourism, focussed on Asian markets, than to be dependent on adventure tourism for westerners.

The EU notes the relative absence of information about 'in-country' or 'local' tourists and 'day trippers' in tourism research (EC 2000), since they tend not to show up in

accommodation statistics, yet the ‘carbon footprint’ of such people is likely to be far less damaging than that of the international ecotourists Carrier and Macleod so despise. What is needed, in commercial terms, is probably a segmented market, the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune with regard to tourist economy ameliorated somewhat through diversification of the nationalities and types of tourist entertained in any destination. Given the temperamental nature of tourism it is also preferable if local people engage in it as one of a range of multiple livelihoods, or at least if they have the option to revert to a different livelihood should the tourist trade fluctuate. Seasonality in the market is another diversification issue tourism planners seek to address.

Thus rather than ‘throwing it out’ altogether, we need to refine our use of the term ecotourism, using the materials available to us to chart existing forms of tourism and existing attitudes towards it, to assess present and future implications of tourism for local livelihoods, and to examine people’s perceptions and understandings of concepts such as ‘ecotourism’, ‘sustainable tourism’ and ‘responsible tourism’ and the implications of these for future tourism development in any place. In order to do this, the WP5 project devised a heuristic typology of practices that help to redefine our understanding of the meaning and value of ecotourism. If ‘ecotourism’ is almost any form of tourism linking tourism and nature, ‘sustainable tourism’ is concerned with the long term effects of that relationship not only on the environment but also on local people. ‘Responsible tourism’ is concerned with the nature of that relationship, and brings the actions of tourists themselves into the frame. The following diagrams should help to make this clearer:

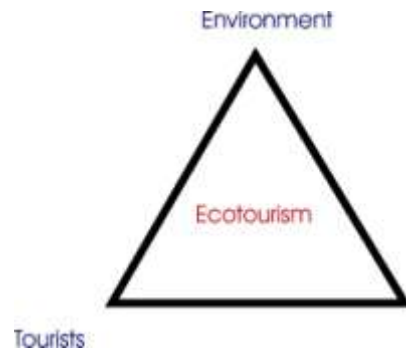


Figure 1: Ecotourism model. Ecotourism in the classic sense engages tourists who seek out activities connected in some way to the environment. The practices of tourists vary between sensitive to destructive in regards to environmental impact. Sensitive behaviour conforms to the ideal “classic” definition. However, negative environmental practices under the guise of “ecotourism” is a documented reality which has led to this term being contested. Note that ecotourism does not emphasise local livelihoods and traditions as much as other forms of tourism.



Figure 2: Sustainable tourism model. Sustainable tourism emphasises the long-term, environmentally conservative practices of local people when they host guests. Tourists may be aware of these practices, but it is not the reason for their visit. Local livelihoods benefit directly from sustainable tourism, which may also promote traditional cultural practices as well as low-impact environmental activities.

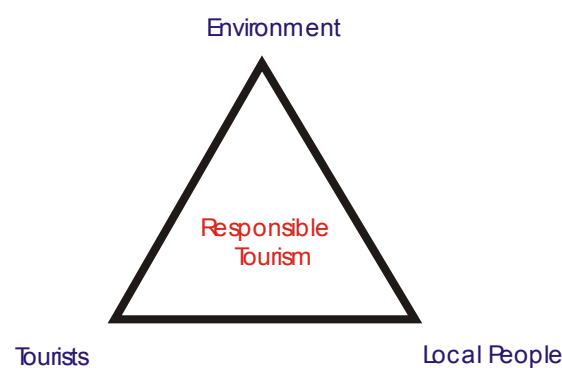


Figure 3: Responsible tourism model. Responsible tourism occurs when both tourists and local people engage in a sensitive manner towards the environment. Leakage of tourist

revenue outside the local communities is minimal. Cultural practices and traditions are respected along with the local environment. It should be noted that this is best accords with the definition of ecotourism as “responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people” proposed by the Ecotourism Society (www.ecotourism.org).

In order to address the elasticity and consequent disutility of the term ‘ecotourism’, our terminology in the project with regard to ‘good practice’ shifted towards ‘sustainable tourism’ and ‘responsible tourism’. Our model was one which would minimize leakage so that benefits to local people could be maximized, would cater for the needs of national as well as international tourists, and would sustain the biosphere through making it worth people’s while to maintain and cherish the biodiversity of the places both lived in and visited. It took into account the attitudes and education of hosts as well as guests. It also required the disaggregation of terms such as ‘hosts’ and ‘guests’, ‘locals’ and ‘tourists’, so that we could understand more of the variety and complexity in what was happening and what might need to be done in the future. Our hypothesis (if we needed one) was that the development of small-scale ‘homestay’ type tourism in facilities provided and managed by local people, offered the maximum likelihood of economic and environmental success and was truly ‘responsible’ ecotourism. However, the particular circumstances of each location (e.g. infrastructural issues) needed to be taken into account in the application of this ‘global’ model, as did the opinions and aspirations of local people. As Hall and Kinnaird (1994: 133) put it, “For tourism development to be successful and acceptable, sensitivity of implementation and sustainability and local participation must be more than just clichés in national or corporate plans. Most importantly, local populations must be involved and shown that conservation and tourism can complement each other to the economic advantage of the local community”.

We were not sure that the local populations in each of the wetland areas needed to be ‘shown’ the advantages of ecotourism in the way Hall and Kinnaird suggest. What we

wanted to do was find out how the discourses of ecotourism played out in their everyday lives. Stronza (2001) notes how most studies of local people look on them as the passive recipients of the impacts of tourism rather than creative entrepreneurs and active agents in its development (cf. Chambers 1999: x). Of course, we must be mindful of the dangers of assuming that local people are part of a cohesive community who will all benefit equally and share the proceeds of ecotourism development. As Stronza reminds us, “not all people in a host destination participate in tourism equally” (ibid: 266-7). On the other hand, to use such an argument as an excuse for inactivity in regions that are socio-economically marginal and environmentally vulnerable is inexcusable. We need to move beyond West and Carrier (2004: 484)’s intrigue with “ecotourism as the institutional expression of particular sets of late capitalist values in a particular political-economic climate,” for example, (the anthropology *of* ecotourism), towards consideration of an anthropology *for* ecotourism.² If a community is to “play a significant role in determining the kind of tourists it receives and the form of tourism they practice” (Nash 1981: 462), then the perceptions and aspirations voiced by local people on this subject must be paramount.

Methods

Work Package 5 of the IMEW project was the first time a comparative and holistic approach had been taken to the study of ecotourism in the wetland sites considered, using the testimonies of tourists, stakeholders and local people to formulate a holistic picture of tourism and ecotourism current and potential in each place. At each site, an ethnographic case study was developed over a three-year period from 2001 to 2004. Archival and textual research in each area was complemented by the development of an ethnographic record of local traditions relevant to the development of tourism: gastronomy, architecture, cultural and religious celebrations, etc. We also engaged in the mapping of companies, organizations and

individuals involved in tourism in the area. There were 6-10 focus groups and 25-40 semi-structured interviews with stakeholders in each wetland site, and up to 80 structured interviews with tourists. The bulk of the ethnographic research was carried out by research partners from the respective region. They were able to conduct the research in the appropriate national languages; the results were transcribed and translated into English for further analysis.

There were practical problems in conducting a study across three such diverse areas. For example, in Romania economic constraints meant that some of the structured interviews were carried out by upper years high school children. Many of the researchers were not social scientists by training, and hence important orientation and methods work was formulated at workshops hosted in Durham in 2001 and 2004, as well as during field visits by members of staff from Durham. Site visits were also important sources of ethnographic material from participant-observation and provided opportunities for further discussion with partners. Results from all the dimensions of WP5 were cross-referenced with those from the other four work packages for overall themes and cross-cultural comparisons (IMEW 2004).

Ecotourism: contexts and discourses in the three wetland sites

The three wetland areas studied were similar in the economic problems they faced relative to the region or country they were in, with many young people leaving the wetlands in search of employment elsewhere. All the wetlands are the subject of conservation measures: Kerkini Lake in Greece is designated as of international importance within the Ramsar Convention, and has been designated a Special Protected Area through an EU directive. The Nemunas Delta in Lithuania (also a Ramsar site) comes under the control of the Nemunas Delta Regional Park, which was established in 1992. The Danube Delta Biosphere Research Authority was established in Romania in 1990. In Lithuania and

Romania, the authorities have taken steps to severely limit local people's access to parts of the wetland.

While the institutions affecting them are different in each site, all three have a common history of local inhabitants' views not being taken into account in environmental planning and legislation (IMEW 2004). In each of the case studies that follow, I shall outline the geographical and touristic parameters which frame local people's ideas and perceptions of ecotourism, after which I go on to analyse the similarities and differences in the discourses surrounding the term.

Greece

The wetland environment of Lake Kerkini in northern Greece is the result of an artificial lake formed by damming the Stymon river for irrigation and flood control purposes in 1932. In 1982 a bigger dam was constructed next to the old one in order to increase the irrigation capacity. The natural environment, with its unusual concatenation of wetland and the adjacent Belles mountains, is the main tourist attraction. In addition to offering the richest and largest bird colony in Greece, the semi-wild water buffaloes wandering along the lake shores (said to date from Alexander the Great's time) are an additional iconic feature. Culturally the region is a rich mixture of local traditions, resulting from the mixture of 'Vlachoi' (Greeks who have lived in the area for some time) and those who settled from Asia Minor during the last century. In some villages, people are beginning to organise festivals based on their traditions, partly to boost visitor numbers. Tourism in the Belles Mountains predates construction of the dam. The health-giving properties of the cooler temperatures and lower humidity were promoted, particularly for people suffering from lung disease. Tavernas in the mountains continue to be well frequented by day trippers who combine gastronomy with a visit to Lake Kerkini or the monastery nearby.

It is estimated that at least 30,000 people per year visit the Lake Kerkini area, although the vast majority come from other parts of northern Greece (principally Thessaloniki, the nearest major city, about two hours' drive to the south) on weekend day trips, and are not easily counted. Only a small, but increasing, proportion of visitors come from other parts of Greece, and very few visitors are from other countries.

The terms 'responsible' or 'sustainable' tourism are not commonly used in Greek parlance. Indeed, 'responsible' in Greek is better translated as 'managed', and lacks the moral overtones of the word 'responsible' in English. The favoured words in Greek are eco- or agrotourism, which are often used interchangeably. '*Oikos*' in Greek means 'family/house' as well as 'ecology'. This double meaning helps contribute to the way that people in the Kerkini area tend to equate ecotourism with a broad experience encompassing life in a homestay environment along with nature (but normally a tamed, domesticated nature). As one taverna owner said,

“In my opinion, ecotourism means that visitors to the region should be able to have the opportunity for direct access to knowledge and contact with the activities of the local population. For example, to be able to visit a farm, see how apples grow on the trees or be given the chance to get a basket and pick some themselves, to see how an animal is raised or how an agricultural product is manufactured and packaged. That is the meaning of ecotourism for me. Waking up in the morning and going to the nest to pick one's eggs for breakfast.”

The association of ecotourism with living on a farm occurred across all educational levels. An organic farmer described agrotourism succinctly as being when “a professional farmer whose basic income comes from farming is able to complement his income from the visiting

tourists either by having two or three rooms that he lets or by producing some goods which he may process to a certain degree and sell...”

Although some local people’s definitions of ecotourism lean decidedly towards the domestic associations of *oikos*, others move towards more ecological connotations. For one farmer, “essentially the question is what we must present to the tourist - the way of life we have, the environment and the products we produce ourselves. In other words the way of life we have in our daily routine. To present, what for me is agrotourism and at the same time to come to know our ecosystem, the lake, our problems, our hunting, our whole life.”

According to one taverna owner, guests coming to the area who are “aware” and know “something about the mechanisms of nature, how things function in the natural environment” are ecotourists. For one hotel owner with an advanced academic degree, ecotourism means “...to bring tourism through some proper studies but not to destroy the environment. Tourism comes but without damaging the area.”

Another important idea about ecotourism in local people’s minds was its opposition to, and possible conflict with, “conventional tourism”, that is, the forms of uncontrolled development and mass tourism seen in the Greek islands and elsewhere. These offered potent examples of the kinds of tourism people wanted to avoid having in their area. One farmer said that she would like tourist development to happen, but that it should not comprise “some kind of casino overlooking the lake”. She further commented, “the hotels and the existing tourism or the future tourism must be ecologically minded. In order not to see some, say, Hilton-type hotels in the area, or casinos or something like that, or foreign women dancing on the hotel’s bar half naked.”. In contrast, ecotourism was seen as something which is limited and regulated, marked by “non-standardised constructions” rather than monotonous rows of large hotels.

Local people perceive two types of tourist as coming to Lake Kerkini. In the words of

a mature local resident who is studying agriculture and agrotourism,

“...simply there are some tourists that are very interested in nature, in the environment around here, they want to learn about the history of the area, they want to hike on the mountain, they ask a lot of things...and there are some other tourists that just come [laughter]. They’ve heard that there is something here, a lake and so they come.”

Many people have noticed an increase in the latter type of visitor, who are perceived as less thoughtful and less appreciative of the natural world than the former. In the words of a horse concession owner,

“...the visitors nowadays are not...like the visitors that used to come here ...Before the tourists were nature lovers, people who loved the nature...Nowadays...the area is very much advertised, now everyone comes, every random one.”

The standard of facilities expected by the latter sort of tourist are seen as much higher. In the words of this same man, visitors come with a desire “to get away from the town and go to the countryside believing that in this way they will go and live like the ones living in the countryside, but this is only in their minds [laughter]. Because, when they come here actually they want some comforts and conveniences”.

Local people saw a need to ‘clean up their act’ if further tourism was to be encouraged. They generally saw themselves as their own worst enemies when it came to rubbish. According to one informant:

“if you ask your parents they will tell you that for Greeks cleanliness was never a priority. We didn’t know about cleanliness. There were no fences or toilet facilities. We didn’t care much about these things. At some point things changed. There are some people though who still wish to live with those standards. Someone should tell them that they should clean up everything.”

The aspirational relationship between ‘hosts’ and ‘guests’ is summarized in the word ‘*filoxenia*’, which loosely and somewhat superficially translates into English as ‘hospitality’. Some people’s conceptions of how *filoxenia* should work are based on experiences they had as tourists themselves. As one woman, involved with an agro-tourism co-operative, said, “...in this area we are more interested in family style accommodation like in Austria where I happened to go at least four times, small hostels, traditional and some other kind of *filoxenia*. You do not call the person a visitor but *filoxenoumenos* [“one who is offered hospitality”]. In order for *filoxenia* to develop, overnight accommodation is necessary. “I would like more people to stay at the village which means that they could see the area better, have a better idea and while having him/her for more than two days we could host them and tell them a few things. When they come in and out of the shop there is very little time to serve them and for them to have a more integrated view.” Television programmes have featured the area in the past few years. One local fisherman reported that local views about the lake were ambivalent until after the television programmes, when “people in the village started talking...started to feel proud.”

In the discourse of ecotourism in Lake Kerkini, then, we start to see themes emerging that will be repeated with different nuances in the two other wetland areas studied. Firstly there are the elastic definitions which in this case link ecotourism with agrotourism but also,

though the specific Greek term ‘oikos’, link ecotourism firmly in people’s minds with homestay tourism. Then there is the contrast between ‘ecotourism’ and ‘conventional’, mass tourism, the effects of which are evident for all to see along many parts of the Greek coastline and islands. In setting up an opposition in this way, ecotourism assumes a degree of moral virtue in people’s eyes, a domesticity and homeliness compared to the debauchery of a (foreign) woman dancing on a hotel bar half-naked. However, it is a virtue that local people do not feel themselves entirely worthy of, insofar as they attribute the untidiness and ugliness present in this ‘natural’ place to the need for some people to modernise their hygiene and waste disposal habits. This is a theme that is repeated in the Lithuanian and Romanian cases that follow.

Lithuania

The Nemunas Delta in Lithuania forms a western border of the country with the former Soviet republic of Kaliningrad. It is estimated that the Nemunas Delta area hosts 200,000 – 300,000 visitors per annum. Summer is the high season for tourism, but anglers come all year round. In our study, 84% of tourists interviewed were from Lithuania. Of these, roughly half were from places less than 100km away. The majority (two thirds) of foreign tourists were German, the rest were from Finland, Poland and Russia. 60% were on a day trip to the area; of the rest, more than half were self-catering (i.e. staying in their own cars, tents or private rental accommodation) and 37% were staying in homestay accommodation.

Fishing is the dominant form of tourism, making up an estimated 70% of the total. The majority of anglers visiting the area are Lithuanian and are generally independent visitors or overnight tourists who come equipped with food and/or camping gear. They tend not to stay in existing homestay accommodation, which they regard as too expensive. Nostalgia tourism accounts for roughly 5 – 10% of the area’s tourism. It comprises mostly former

residents now living in Germany. These types of tourists are informally referred to as “Memelländer”, that is, people from the Memel (Nemunas). The flow of these types of tourists was heaviest directly after the Second World War and is now waning because people are ageing or were content with a single visit. However, some of the children and grandchildren of these former inhabitants continue to visit the area, spending money on goods and services, and tending to their graveyards. Nature tourism comprises only 5 – 7.5% of the tourism in the Nemunas Delta.

As in Greece, connotations of eco-tourism in Lithuania were positive and often correlated with “clean and tidy” environments. A 60 year-old milkmaid responded to the question “what about ecotourism?” with “you mean clean, don’t you?” Another local person defined ecotourism as “environmentally clean tourism”. Indeed, rubbish and pollution were pervasive themes dominating many exchanges about the natural environment. The following dialogue with a 16 year-old student illustrates a typical response:

Q: Have you ever heard a word “eco-tourism”?

A: No I haven’t.

Q: How could you explain it?

A: It’s about ecology. Tourism when you behave well in nature.

Q: Could eco-tourism be developed here?

A: Yes, of course.

Q: How should local people and tourists protect the environment and biodiversity?

A: They should pollute the environment less. Tourists should look after the campsites. They shouldn’t drop litter. Local people should look after their homes. They should keep everything in order.

The correlation of ecotourism with a clean and tidy moral universe is, like Greece, a largely aspirational one and is perhaps compounded by its comparative rarity as a tourist form (as revealed by the 'nature tourism' statistic). The status of fishing tourism was problematic. Some local people felt that fishing was a natural activity³ and that tourists had little or no impact on the environment. A much more prevalent view, however, was that fishing tourists were responsible for leaving a lot of rubbish. Rubbish bags were reportedly issued alongside fishing licences, but were not used. People complained of a lack of refuse and sanitation disposal.

As in Greece, some local people also felt they themselves were to blame for the rubbish, and one person correlated untidy locals with those who were unemployed. Others mentioned that keeping local communities tidy was something which had to be done consistently through time, and that solutions to the problem had to be long-term. Very importantly, there was a strong feeling that more people would visit the area if improvements were made in keeping areas orderly and free of rubbish.

Some people mentioned with pride that people came to the area to enjoy nature, peace and quiet, and contrasted what they were able to offer with the mass tourism found in the coastal resort of Palanga, situated further north. The consensus view seemed to be that tourism should not be of this mass type. One resident described how some visitors would drive through the local forest and feel disturbed, even "frightened" by midges. However, "...other people driving through the forest are happy. I think they are our true tourists and that this place is for them."

A current criticism of tourism in one of the villages involved in the study was that "tourists don't stay for a long time. They arrive in buses, go along the central street and leave." Inhabitants in this village often expressed the opinion that there was nothing to show tourists, who tended to "arrive and leave with nothing". One young cleaning woman was

similarly disparaging: “we don’t have anything special here – only water.” But a young unemployed man appreciated that people came “to our remote area” to have a rest from the noise and bustle of the towns. One local teacher said “I live here and I don’t find anything special, but people who come here value our nature, our surroundings.” Similar sentiments were expressed by a village woman: “if strangers say it is nice, it means it is really nice. We are used to it and don’t see its beauty”.

Local people were generally enthusiastic about the potential development of ecotourism in the area, largely for its perceived economic benefits. The term “entrepreneur” was not used to describe local people providing forms of hospitality to tourists, perhaps due to ambivalence towards capitalism dating back to the Soviet period. Despite this, however, many local people were already working hard to use private means to engage with tourism. Oddly, it was a local person not engaged with tourism who summarised this independent spirit. The milkmaid talked about the economic hardship of young women in the community and said that this problem “doesn’t mean that we are going to sit like ministers and do nothing.” Local perspectives on tourism varied between the different villages, but a common theme in interviews with local people was that more work was needed in order to develop the infrastructural support necessary for it to flourish. There was also a perceived need to lift the constraints which restrictions were inflicting on potential entrepreneurs, “Either we are allowed or we are not allowed [to establish tourism enterprises], but we have to control the situation. We have the regional park here but being in wild nature is difficult because of the strict rules.”

Another specific problem was the proximity of the region to the Russian satellite of Kaliningrad. Kaliningrad was seen not only as a source of poaching and pollution but also as a constraint to tourism development. Restrictive border controls required seemingly excessive documentation for even small day trips between the waterways of the two

countries. One entrepreneur complained that tourists who rented a canoe of his were escorted back to his property by armed border guards because their canoe lacked some of the proper documentation. In addition to tourist passports, all boats, even a canoe, must carry certification of technical examination, a registration number and a purchasing document. The entrepreneur, frustrated, complained that “the frontier hampers [tourism development], protection of nature hampers [tourism development]. They do not allow anybody to come here. Frontier guards have no work. Nobody builds a fire there, everybody is scared to come there because they catch you at once. We have perfect rules to punish everybody.” Despite these difficulties, the point was also made that proximity to Kaliningrad could be an opportunity if more open access were permitted. One inhabitant mentioned that recent plans (shelved) to build a bridge between the area and Kaliningrad would have helped to increase tourism.

In the Nemunas Delta, therefore, like Lake Kerkini, people were not sitting waiting for ecotourism to happen – they were active agents in its development, Stronza-style (2001). it maintains its contrastive position with mass tourism, with the resort of Palanga the exemplar here. Again the moral virtue of ecotourism developing where rubbish and dirt could be kept in check and nature allowed to flourish was mentioned, although it must be pointed out that, probably due to its relatively late nascence on the scene and relatively small numbers of those following what is known as ‘nature tourism’ compared to fishing and cultural pursuits, local people’s knowledge of and imagination concerning ecotourism was generally lower than in the other two sites.

Romania

The Danube delta is the largest wetland site in Europe, and is a route for numerous migrating

birds and other flora and fauna. It therefore has much to offer the birdwatcher, fisherman, naturalist and hunter. The size of the area covered by the Danube delta means that more visitors than in Greece or Lithuania stay for at least one night. However, in recent years some of the hotels and agencies in Tulcea, the ‘jumping off’ town for the delta, have organised day trips to Sulina and the village of Sfintu Gheorgie at the end of the Danube delta branches of the same names. At present the main tourist season is during the summer months, particularly July and August. Hunting is a minor activity but one that brings in visitors to the area out of the summer tourist season. The Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve Authority (DDBRA) is much involved in regulating tourism. It has a tourist information centre at Tulcea and runs two other visitor centres in the delta itself.

Tourism is unequally distributed around the delta. Some places are aesthetically blighted. Caraorman, for example, located off the Sulina branch, is dominated by an abandoned sand and gravel extraction works, a failed legacy of the Ceausescu era, and a tourist visiting Chilia Veche, accessible only by a long ferry ride from Tulcea, is greeted by a vista of modern buildings, including blocks of flats and the skeleton of a hotel that was under construction before the revolution and never completed. Its prison is also something of an eyesore, but does at least generate some visitors since, because transport is not daily, people visiting inmates have to stay in the village overnight.

Tourism numbers have declined from a peak of 139,000 in 1980, and the revolution of 1989 transformed the types of tourist visiting or able to visit. One homestay provider in Crisan, one of the main tourist village destinations in the delta, remembered that “there were so many [tourists] before the revolution that they were staying on the street desperately looking for accommodation.” However, numbers appear to be increasing again, although given the vastness of the area, exact estimates are hard to make. The ratio of Romanian to foreign visitors is roughly 2:1, a lower ratio than for Greece or Lithuania.

A homestay provider in Sf. Gheorgie described ecotourism as follows: “I don’t know if I understand well. Not with a tent but like living with me? I put rubbish in the container and take it to a central spot. I insulate the house’s walls with reed so it doesn’t need much energy to heat. This is an eco-friendly heating system. I have a good boat that does not put oil in the water...I have taken the rubbish off my fishing guests and put it in my boat so my boat is messy but not the outside.” Again, the moral virtue inherent in ecotourism and its aspirational treatment of rubbish in order to protect the beauty of nature comes over loud and clear in this statement, but also its equation with ‘not camping’, the disorder associated with which has parallels in Lithuania.

A more salient local categorisation of tourism in the Danube delta, however, is into ‘organised’ or ‘unorganised’. ‘Organised’ was used to describe the day or multi-day trips organised by the hotels in Tulcea and the floating hotels in villages on the edge of the delta that are accessible by car. However, these types of accommodation were generally too expensive for most Romanian budgets although they were frequently used by foreign visitors. ‘Unorganised’ tourism described “individual” tourism where people come to the delta to camp, swim and/or fish. This form of tourism was criticised on a number of grounds, the most cited of which was the rubbish generated. Other complaints included how little money those with their own accommodation injected into the economy, and noise pollution. One tourist operator in Murighol, another delta village, suggested, “they [tourists camping on the riverbanks] are not paying any tax and maybe they should...to the local authorities”. Some deaths from swimming in the delta were also reported each year as individuals partaking in ‘unorganised’ tourism drowned after being sucked into whirlpools created by underwater tree trunks.

Another type of unorganised tourism is where individuals or families travel by boat to villages within the delta and stay with local families. This was referred to as “traditional” tourism or “homestay” tourism. Homestay tourism has a long history in Romania, and

villages that are relatively accessible by ferry are favoured. The popularity of Crisan, for example, is in part due to its relatively accessible location on the Sulina branch of the Danube, the main shipping channel, where it is served three times a week by ferry.

However, a problem facing the further, more organised development of homestay tourism is the difficulty of making reservations ahead of time. Instead, tourists are greeted at the pier by a number of homestay providers, each of whom is vying to get tourists to stay at their homes. Once the host and guest link up, stays generally include the consumption of local dishes, most of which include some fish and the well known local delicacy, fish soup. Some homestay providers offer tours of the areas by rowboat or small motor boat. Others let the tourists find their own ways to relax. The research arm of the DDBRA has encouraged the establishment of a network of homestay tourism providers, but co-operation and communication remains a problem.

As in the other wetland sites, local people were acutely aware of the types of tourism they wanted to encourage and those they did not. As well as criticizing campers, they resented the lack of benefit from the day trips organised from Tulcea: for example, in one village on the coast, day tourists were driven in a horsecart from the pier to the beach, bypassing local shops and services completely. When homestay providers provide their own menus for their day excursions, by contrast, the profit was seen to stay more or less completely in local hands.

The attribution of blame for ecologically damaging behaviour (as symbolised in rubbish yet again!) seems to be equally apportioned by local people to themselves and to tourists from other parts of Romania. Foreign tourists were seen as less likely to litter the environment. As a teacher and long-term tour guide to the delta from Bucharest said, “Romanians are not aware that they have to protect the environment everywhere they go....The foreigners have respect for the environment. They are aware of it and they don’t

scatter anything. They collect the plastic bags, ice cream wrappers, cola bottles, beer cans in a special place. The Romanians still have to learn.” Likewise, a local taverna owner discussed how he liked foreign tourists because they brought their rubbish back with them from the beach.

The organised tour operators claimed that the tourists they brought to the delta did not leave rubbish. This was partially due to them taking responsibility for their guests, collecting their rubbish and being with them throughout their visit. Homestay providers did not have the opportunity to watch over the activities of their guests in this way. The aspirational, moral virtue of eco-tourism was to the fore again in the view of one homestay provider equating it with not leaving rubbish behind and confining tourism activities to designated areas. He also said that, despite these ideals, “...we cannot be with tourists every minute so some tourists may behave unecologically and cause some damage to the environment.” There was some controversy about access of tourists to restricted areas of the delta such as Sachlin Island. Local people were denied access to the island, but several respondents claimed that some less scrupulous tour operators were organising landings there.

Both hotel and homestay providers agreed that their preferred tourists were those who appreciated the delta’s natural and cultural offerings. One boat captain said, “I really like the people who come and ask questions about the delta, about the birds and animals that live here.” Likewise, another tourist operator in Murighol said that people in search of discos and the like were not her favourite guests. Instead, “the real tourists are coming here to see the landscape, to relax.” A homestay provider stated, “I prefer the foreign tourists because they are more civilised, quiet people. The Romanians are of many categories but the worst category is people who are very pretentious because they have money.” Such views about the Romanian nouveau-riche were commonly expressed.

Some of the village homestay providers had ideas about how tourism could develop

based on what they had seen on television. A school teacher discussed the possibilities for providing tourists with opportunities to experience the traditional way of life, "...there are people who pay a lot of money to go and live in the wilderness... I saw an American movie in which one of the visitors wanted to graze the cattle as it used to be done...he was the main hero and he was on holiday." It appeared that providers were becoming increasingly aware of the attractions of traditional architecture and livelihoods for tourists. Another local tourism provider in Sf. Gheorgie said, "...the majority of them [tourists] are very interested to see how the houses were decorated in the past and even to stay in those houses." Most of the time however, eating locally produced vegetables and freshly caught fish was the extent to which traditional livelihoods impacted on tourism.

Local people saw the development of homestay and alternative tourism in the Danube delta as offering virtually its only hope of socio-economic progress, providing not only a direct additional income to the households involved, but also the opportunity for young people to stay in the delta, despite its lack of educational and other economic opportunities, and to learn languages by conversing with foreign tourists. In response to the question of how such tourism affects the local economy, comments such as "it has a good effect" and "the villagers do not have as many sources of income as in the past...tourism represents a good source of income" were typical. For some people, involvement in tourism had already been beneficial. As a homestay provider said, "You can see how our house looks in comparison with the others. We've earned enough money along the years to build a new house and to make some improvements. My son has learned foreign languages working with tourists and that helped him to find a job."

Most local people currently in the tourist business rely on tourism as one of a number of sources of livelihood. As one village homestay hostess (a teacher) said, "I would give up my job at school and dedicate myself to tourism, but I can't as long as the profit is not very

big. We have a family, a child who should go to school and we build all the time.” Only a few have made hosting visitors their full-time occupation, as this homestay provider explained:

“I’ve been a teacher at the local school for 15 years. I had to quit my job to have enough time to spend for this ‘business’ and especially to look after my guests, to do everything to make them be satisfied with my services. My husband is a fisherman, so he has an active ‘role’, too. As you see, we have earned enough money from hosting tourists to extend the house and to build another house so I don’t regret quitting my job. The success of our business it depends of course on the number of tourists we have and on external factors which can be important...like it was, for example, two years ago with the anthrax scare or the pollution from Baia Mare, etc.”

This respondent complained of the high maintenance costs of their investment:

“Yes, we have problems all the time - there is damp here - we are like on a floating land, and the houses deteriorate in time so we have to maintain and fix them all the time. The walls crack here and there ... no matter how well you build the land slides because of the water whose level is not constant all the time. The land moves in winter too when the water freezes because it is very cold. So, on one hand we make investments and on the other we spend a lot of money in maintaining the investment. So you get my point, in order to have a big profit from tourism we must make big investments.”

The Danube delta provides further evidence for the positive regard people have for homestay-type ecotourism and the long tradition of homestay tourism in the area which augurs well for

its further development. More conflicts are apparent between the tour providers in Tulcea and the people living in the Delta villages than is the case in Greece or Lithuania. The long tradition of homestay tourism augurs well for the further development of this form of ecotourism, although infrastructural issues such as the establishment of communications and networks of providers over the enormous areas covered by the delta need to be resolved.

Discussion

This paper has argued that we should not throw the baby of ecotourism out with the bathwater of irresponsible ecotourism practice. The models of ecotourism, sustainable tourism and responsible tourism developed for the purpose of this project provided a heuristic way of thinking about ecotourism and what forms are best for local people, their environments, and indeed the tourists they serve. What this study shows is that our informants in the three European wetland areas considered were not unwilling recipients of externally imposed tourism. They were actively engaged in the discursive formation of ecotourism in its various manifestations, and were keen to recognise its development potential in what are otherwise economically marginal areas. The elasticity of ecotourism as term, far from rendering it meaningless, made it polysemic and multivocal.

People's conceptions were partly formed through their experiences (positive and negative) of tourism in other places as well as their own environs, either first-hand or through television and films. These experiences were used to develop what they perceived as desirable for their own area. In many cases, ecotourism was held up as a contrast to 'mass tourism', and a sense of moral virtue surrounded the term. However, in people's discourse the problem of rubbish, generally either self-generated or generated by same country nationals, cast an aspirational blight on the prospects for attracting people and maintaining the beauty of the natural world.

While there was the general hope that tourism could be developed, particularly for its potential to provide desperately needed jobs and to encourage young people to stay in the area, we did note that no-one in Greece, Lithuania or Romania who was not currently involved in tourism in some way discussed its development as a potential alternative source of livelihood for themselves, although everyone was willing to have more information and training opportunities in this field. One problem identified by all stakeholders was the short tourist season and the need to develop facilities to attract tourists during the winter months. Furthermore, as with many forms of development, there is a danger that the development of ecotourism will cause greater inequalities within communities, as can be seen nascently in Romania.

Through research *on* ecotourism in the three wetland sites, and specifically local people's views and discourses surrounding it, this project has brought forward the research agenda *for* ecotourism. In all three sites, the need for some kind of 'fair trade' approach to tourism, as Eades noted in Bosnia-Herzegovina, was keenly perceived. Homestay-type arrangements were generally favoured, the exact format of the arrangement depending on the prevalent household structures and cultural attitudes towards dealing with guests. Those interviewed also differentiated strongly between different types of tourist, and had a notion of what sorts of tourist they wished to encourage and those they would like to see less of. In all cases, the preferred type was the longer-staying, ecologically and culturally responsible individual. In terms of the typology of ecotourism developed for the project, the local people in European wetlands see responsible tourism as the way of the future.

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Notes

1. The overall aim of this project was to investigate the conflict between conservation policies and indigenous livelihoods in wetland areas through a nested set of work packages looking simultaneously at local perceptions of the environment and conservation; biological perceptions of the environment; the engendering of environmental awareness, the institutional dynamics of wetland areas, and finally the potential for responsible tourism as a means of sustainable development of the wetland areas.
2. This is comparable with the distinction Grillo and Stirrat (1997) make between the ‘anthropology *of* development’ and ‘anthropology *for* development’.
3. Half the adult population of Lithuania list angling as a recreational activity.

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