Standardization in Ecotourism: Ethics, Challenges, & Potential

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INTRODUCTION

Ecotourism is a trending label in the tourism industry, especially in places known for natural attractions. This label can mean many different things. Though some certifications exist, businesses labeled as ecotourism may not be following standards or guidelines as there isn't a universal code or set of standards to follow. This can be problematic as consumers may think they are traveling with environmental impact in mind while inadvertently contributing to types of businesses they are trying to avoid or even worse, having a detrimental impact on the environment and/or communities they are visiting. For example, there is a belief that any type of ecotourism may damage ecosystems (Lawrence, et al, 1997). Some travelers interested in

ecotourism are more interested in pleasure-seeking, self-reflection/growth, and/or status than environmental impact or impact on local communities (Hunt and Harbor, 2019).

Though there are many areas of ecotourism that are important to examine, I'm focusing on three categories in this synthesis, highlighting four ecotourism businesses in Costa Rica that I experienced as a guest in June of 2022. These areas include ecotourism and standardization, environmental impact claims, economic impact on local communities. Through synthesis I will explore best practices in ecotourism, pitfalls, and potential for improvements.

BACKGROUND

Ecotourism and Standardization

Ecotourism is sustainable tourism that considers the well-being of locals, the environment, and often involves some form of education, excursion, and/or community connection (TIES, 2017). The industry is monetarily significant to the extent that countries such as Costa Rica have made ecotourism a focus of its economic aims. This nation-wide focus began in the 1980s with more than one million people visiting annually (Blum, 2008)). Costa Rica is known as one of the most biodiverse regions on the planet and is host to numerous ecotourism endeavors that claim to have sustainability at the forefront of their organizations (Koens, et al 2009). Compared to other tourism industries, ecotourism is relatively new, therefore standards are still developing. There is often tension between economic and environmental goals (Lawrence, et al, 1997).

Several types of certifications and standards currently exist. They include clubs, certification firms, and companies producing certified products (Valenciano-Salazar, et all 2021). Programs frequently focus on shifting members' behaviors by providing economic incentives through public perception. Among the most well-known are the Costa Rican Certification for Sustainable Tourism (CST), Fair Trade (FT), Carbon Neutral (CN), and ISO 14001 (Valenciano-Salazar, et al 2021). According to Valenciano-Salazar's survey, 25% of Costa Ricans can name a certification type or brand. This percentage of recognition is roughly parallel to surveys conducted in other parts of the world (Valenciano-Salazar, et al 2021). While the majority of people are unaware of the existence of these types of certifications, this percentage is significant. However,

certifications are likely not the primary criteria that aid consumers in their decision making process.

DISCUSSION

Environmental Impact Claims

Due to lack of standardization and/or certification, organizations and businesses are able to present information and data of their choosing. Because there isn't oversight, this information isn't always backed with facts. Many companies lack data to support their claims. For example, Selina is a global hostel chain with nearly 145 hostels (Selina, 2022). In Costa Rica alone, Selina owns 10 hostels including hostels in Manuel Antonio and San Jose. Through the use of a mandatory cell phone app for guests they've captured the virtual worker and young travelers market through having a one-stop-virtual-shop. Most locations offer ecotours, workshops, shuttles, restaurants, social activities, and frequent amenities such as pools, co-working spaces, and communal kitchens (Selina, 2022). They are currently recognized as a Fortune 500 company, beginning in 2007 with an estimated annual revenue of $500 million per year. They are listed as having 1626 employees and $395 million in funding (Growjo, 2022).

At the forefront of their marketing is an emphasis on sustainable tourism, diversity/inclusion, and local communities. The environmental impact statement listed on their website states that they are working to foster a culture of sustainability and kindness that positively impacts the environment, local communities, guests, and other stakeholders (Selina, 2022). According to Selina's 2019 self-published impact report, they have 1,340+ environmental impact programs. Which includes 500+ beach and city cleanups, 30 climate change lectures, 90 recycling workshops, 50 animal protection talks and workshops, plus 28 "reforestation" which is not defined (Pineda, 2020). While these numbers may seem significant, they are void of detail and definition as to what the programs actually entail. No visual documentation is provided. Additionally, Selina claims to have reached over 100,000+ people through their programs (Pineda, 2020). However, beach and city cleanups are included with free yoga classes and surf lessons in the numbers assessment. Therefore, creating a potentially misleading dataset. While it is listed that there are 4,480 partnerships with NGOs, government agencies, and academic

institutions (Pineda, 2020); none of these partners are listed nor is any information shared on partnership details.

In contrast to Selina, the Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve which is located in Monteverde in the Puntarenas Province in Costa Rica, has certifications and conservation partners listed on the homepage of their website (Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve, 2022). Like Selina they have a lodge, restaurant, tours, and provide several services. They also have a gift shop and educational programs. Unlike Selina, their site connects directly to information on their environmental and educational programs. They provide an overview of what their programs entail and photo documentation. According to their website, profits from their programs protect 11,120 acres of three types of forest and directly support scientific research (Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve, 2022). Although an environmental impact statement is not provided, Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve shares ample information including photo documentation, publications, and testimonials from their programs which they claim have been operating for over 30 years. Selina's website provides none of this.

Another lodging and ecotourism focused organization that focuses on environmental impact is the Corcovado Foundation Biohostel and Environmental Center (CFBEV), a non-profit hostel in Drake Bay in the Osa, Puntarenas Province of Costa Rica (CFBEV, 2022). The hostel hosts both guests and volunteers. Profits generated go towards programs which include ecosystem restoration, organic agriculture, and educational community programs (CFBEV, 2022). CFBEV labels themselves "regenerative ecotourism" meaning that they are mission-driven with a primary focus on sustainability, their local community and environment. Like Selina, they focus on amenities that young travelers enjoy; hosting a range of ecotours, a small restaurant, bar, wifi, communal kitchen, shuttle, and social activities. Unlike both Selina and Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve, CFBEV has daily volunteer opportunities for short-term guests. This can range from participating in reforestation projects, to helping on the farm, assisting with environmental education kids classes, and/or helping with various ecological projects in the area (CFBEV, 2022). Information is provided on their website although it is undergoing updating. Through a link provided, there is detailed information on the Corcovado Foundation itself. Longtime partners, the hostel and foundation have recently merged. Hence the website updates. Included

on this site is a self-published impact statement page along with documentation, sponsors, history, and certifications.

While websites in general lack standardization in terms of content, they are how most people determine where they go and what businesses they support. While all three businesses provide lodging, educational, and excursion options; Selina's site is geared towards aesthetics of the lodging they provide while Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve emphasizes credibility and environmental impact. CFBEV site is undergoing changes although a lot of detail is provided about their programs and impact. However, neither website compares to Selina's app or website in aesthetic appeal. It's important to note that Selina is a for profit corporation unlike Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve and CFBEV, which are both non-profit organizations. Business models, organization structure and capacity as well as mission do have an impact on scope and goals of organizations.

Yorkin is an indigenous Bribri village located in the Southern Caribbean Coastal region of Costa Rica near the Panama border. For over 20 years they have been hosting travelers interested in ecotourism (Lafferty, 2022). Different from the other three businesses they don't do direct booking of guests through a website. Instead, they rely on credible ecotourism companies and educational groups to bring visitors to them. Environmentalism and sustainability are intertwined in their culture. Nearly every aspect of how the village operates has minimal impact on the environment. Though they do need money for some modern conveniences they are relatively self-sufficient as a community. Even the food they feed guests are grown by them using food forest agricultural practices (Miriam, 2022). Experiences are specific to their culture; providing guests with cacao making and sugarcane harvesting demonstrations, plant walks with an emphasis on ethnobotany, cooking lessons, traditional crafts, and bow shooting.

Without standardization can we take businesses' environmental claims as fact? Does sharing certifications and listing business partners provide accreditation in the minds of consumers? Does photo documentation and testimonials add credibility? How much of this matters in the minds of consumers? How can businesses with less web access compete in an increasingly virtual commerce environment?

Economic Impact on Local Communities

Tourism has a direct impact on local communities, especially economies. Businesses that are operated by local people may have a different economic impact than those that aren't. Profits generated from CFBEV goes towards programs which include ecosystem restoration, organic regenerative agriculture, and community programs. They highlight this impact on their website (CFBEV, 2022). Through tours and community programs they generate income for their local economy. Instead of hosting their own tours, CFBEV connects visitors with local tours. Money generated from the tours go to multiple families in the community (Jimenez, 2022). The hostel doesn't take a cut from tours. Instead funds are divided among local businesses (Jimenez, 2022). "When a tour is booked, funds go to the tour company, the tour guide, vehicle driver, boat driver, restaurant, and farm that provides the produce. All are local Costa Ricans." (Mendoza, 2022). Because of Drake Bay's isolation, money generated through these programs are primarily spent in the community.

In contrast, the majority of profits generated from Selina's tours (and business) go back into the corporation and to shareholders (Crunchbase, 2002). Selina pays entrance fees at locations visited which includes numerous national parks and cultural centers. Some Costa Ricans are employed, however the company itself is listed as based in the United Kingdom and Panama (Crunchbase, 2022) (Growjo, 2022). Selina states on their website that instructors and guide positions are frequently contracted out to locals (Selina, 2022). Selina provides their own transport services which are slightly more expensive than local options (Selina, 2022). For example, in San Jose Costa Rica, Selina offers an in-house shuttle to their airport for $25 while a taxi ride is around $15 and operated by a local (Selina, 2022). While their website claims that supporting local economies and employee benefits are important to their company, their estimated revenue per employee is $307,821 (Growjo, 2022). Based on global trends its very likely employees aren't even paid a fraction of this money.

In contrast, profits from the Yorkin Village go towards conservation, economic improvements, and cultural preservation efforts inside the community (Lafferty, 2022). Instead of a growth model like many ecotourism businesses, they limited the amount of travelers they host per year in order to create work/life balance for their community. Their ecotourism business is the community's largest source of outside income (Miriam, 2022).Though they do most of their business in-house, Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve does employ locals. They highlight local

artists in their gift shop and contribute directly through educational programs (Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve, 2022). Additionally, their preservation efforts have a direct impact on surrounding communities.

In short, while Selina does employ local people, they are not supporting local businesses or economies to the same level as the other three, though they have the financial means to make a much larger impact. Because this is a competitive industry, claims regarding supporting local communities absolutely matter. In terms of local impact, it's concerning that Selina keeps as much business as possible in-house. Due to these factors, it's possible that businesses like Selina may have a negative impact on the communities where they operate because they are likely taking business away from local businesses. Additionally, few of the shareholders or the business itself are local to where they operate. Whereas both CFBEV and the Yorkin Village have a substantial impact on their local communities. Monterverde while also keeping business in-house through their restaurant, lodge, and ecotours; puts profits towards local preservation efforts which is the sole reason they exist.

How can one determine a business's impact on the local community where they operate? Is there a set of guidelines or standards that would make sense for an assessment? Can a business that's operating outside of their country of origin have a positive impact on places where they operate? If yes, how can this be achieved in an ethical way?

Diversity and Inclusion

Employing and patronizing diverse people including women, LGTBQIA+, and persons from other marginalized groups, is important from a humanitarian perspective. Depending on the country, descrimination practices may be common due to cultural norms and historic marginalization of certain groups. It can be challenging to find this information on websites and in marketing materials. Although websites such as Yelp and Lonely Planet can provide some information. While other aspects of Selina's ethics may be in question, their support of diversity and their non-decrimiation stance is predominant throughout their marketing materials (Selina, 2022). Meaning that persons in these groups can go to a Selina hostel knowing they will be safe from discrimination which is espeically important to LGTBQIA+ travelers and solo women

travelers. In contrast, it's important to note that their top 8 paid employees including founders visually appear to be white males from Panama (Crunchbase, 2022).

The Yorkin village in contrast, was started by a group of indignous women. At first they received a lot of discouragement from the elders and men in their community (Lafferty, 2022). Over time, sentiments shifted as the business they created became important to the income source of the community. Monteverde, however, has few women involved in the management of the business or working as guides. A worker at a shop in Monteverde expressed that this is due to outdated cultural practices. Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve actively discriminates against women in certain positions (Gonzalas, 2022). She said they occasionally fill roles to meet requirements but that no women stay long. A guide herself, she started her own woman-led tour guide business. Like the Yorkin Village, CFBEV employs women at every level. Their founder is a woman and the current volunteer director is a woman (Jimenez, 2022). While they don't list an inclusion statement directy, the vibe of the hostel is inclusive and progressive.

A common response to discriminatory practices is to create alternatives to what already exists. This is one of the ways how changes in culture begin. Diversity and inclusion is yet another area where standardization could play an important role. Other than Yelp and other online review sources, is there a way to share experiences at hostels and hotels regarding diversity? Could certification be more important to travelers who have safety concerns?

CONCLUSION

Even as early as the 90s, articles have been published about the importance of standardization in ecotourism. Shores calls for tourists to ask questions, share preferences, vote with their dollars (Shores, 1992). What does ideal ecotourism look like? While this might vary, many sources emphasize sustainability and environmental impact at the forefront of their practices. Diversity and inclusion is celebrated through features in marketing materials and signage. Local impact is substantiated through highlighting all the ways businesses are contributing to local economic ecosystems. Authenticity is important. Though it may be challenging for tourists to recognize. Accountability through practices like standardization and certification, provide guidelines for business to follow and confidence for consumers. It's important that tourists ask for the changes

they would like to see such as female tour guides and hostels that welcome LGTBQIA+ persons. Markets do shift practices.

While current standardization practices in ecotourism may not be widely recognized by the public, they play an important role in accountability. Many fields and industries operate within ethical codes because they help ensure that safety standards are met, humanitarian concerns are heard, and the integrity of the field is upheld. They can also aid in business. While there are some certifications and standardizations available in Ecotourism, this area is not as robust as it could be. What could happen if standarizions were able to put pressure on business to prove their claims are legitimate? Or ensure that all organizations under the ecotourism label met certain requirements for accreditation that included their environmental impact, impact on local communities, and diversity and inclusion? With access to global technology on the rise in the midst of climate change, accountability is vital.

It's important to examine businesses to discover ways to be competitive and more appealing to young customers. If robust websites, apps, marketing plans and social media are needed, is there a way that smaller businesses and non-profits could form partnerships and cooperatives as a means of competing? How can businesses be held accountable for false claims about impact? Or pressured to make more positive contributions to the environment and local communities.

Building on Costa Rica's example, what could regenerative tourism look like in the US? What if more profits from tourism business including Air Bnbs were used for preservation and conservation efforts? Organizations like United Plant Savers are actively working on linking land projects that have an aim of medicinal plant conservation, through their Botanical Sanctuary Network (United Plant Savers, 2022). How could this idea be expanded into different areas, potentially through ecotourism?

Ultimately, change and accountability happen when consumers ask for what they want. If these three areas are at the forefront with best practices at the helm, then they will become dominant practice.

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