



# Ethical tourism consumption: should businesses be concerned?

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## Abstract

Negative socio-cultural, economic and environmental impacts of tourism continue to be a major concern. This concern has led to the number of initiatives aimed at creating awareness about tourist activities and the overall impact of tourism on the environment and society in general. This awareness has already started to have an effect on the way in which some tourists behave, how they select tourism products and destinations. This wave of awareness may in the future also compel tourism businesses to operate businesses differently, in a profitable way whilst ensuring the minimisation of the negative impacts of tourism. This paper focuses on addressing the possible impact of alarming tourism markets on the negative socio-cultural, economic and environmental issues caused by the tourism industry and it addresses the impact this awareness may have on tourism businesses currently lacking corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives. This paper thus draws the attention of ethical tourism to businesses and reinforces the importance and implications thereof. Ethical tourism strives to maximise the positive impacts of tourism, and simultaneously tries to minimise the destructive impacts. The concept of ethical tourism also means that purchasing decisions of tourism consumers will include an element of responsible consumption. This in turn will mean that businesses without ethical credentials will be less competitive, should this "new tourist" phenomenon gain traction. The paper encourages that the tourism industry should lead the way in terms of responsible tourism, not solely for the purpose preparing for the ethical tourism market in the future and being competitive, but because it is about protecting and improving the future of the tourism industry sustainably.

**Keywords:** environment, tourism, negative impacts, ethical consumption, tourist.

## Introduction and Framework

Tourism represents an essential and unique social perspective for the study of ethical consumers. The purpose of this paper is to describe the phenomenon of ethical tourism consumption and how it could affect tourism business in the future. The paper also highlights the importance of tourism businesses applying ethical business credentials as part of their services. This paper does not argue whether an ethical/responsible tourist exists or not, neither does it forecast ethical tourism as a niche market, but rather asks the question what will happen when more tourists eventually become aware of the impact of their activities on tourism businesses on the environment and society? What will happen when the majority of tourists change their attitude towards buying patterns in terms of being an ethical tourism consumer? This paper does not conclude that ethical tourism will in fact become be a niche market.

As concerns such as global warming and climate change are receiving traction globally, people are becoming more environmentally aware (Ivanovic, Khunou, Reynish, Pawson, Tseane & Wassung, 2009:324). Tourists are becoming more aware of the negative impacts of tourism (Lee, Bonn, Reid and Kim, 2017:298, Devi, 2015:64). This awareness has begun to influence the tourists' selection of destinations or tourism products that adopt environmentally friendly strategies and minimises their negative impacts (Buffa, 2015:140-142). This is because tourism has a close relationship with the environment and is often



criticised for its negative impacts. Through awareness, ethical consumerism in tourism is growing and tourism businesses “might” need to deploy good management and planning to minimise the negative impacts whilst adapting to the buying patterns and demands of a conservationist as a tourist or ethical tourists in general. Ethical tourism has attracted the attention of many researchers (Mossaz, & Coghlan, 2017; Moscardo, 2018; Weeden & Boluk, 2014; Lovelock & Lovelock, 2013; Fennell, 2015), however, few have focused on the possible impact that ethical tourism will have on tourism businesses.

### **Problem statement**

Global tourism trends indicate the developing tourist interest in authentic and responsible travel experiences. According to Buffa (2015:140-142) developing strategies that “enable destinations to catch this tourist segment is therefore, becoming more and more important for competitiveness”. Weeden and Boluk, (2014:2) state that it seems as though the tourism industry and producers of tourism products have not responded to calls for responsible tourism. Even with the increase in ethical tourism, the tourism service providers seem to ignore the prospects of tourism consumers seeking businesses that support responsible tourism. The main concern is what the implications are for the tourism businesses that do not commit fully to responsible tourism. The researcher is of the view that tourism businesses might be forced to fully adopt corporate social responsibility (CSR) drives once the majority of tourism product consumers religiously adopt new attitudes and behaviours in terms of supporting businesses that fully supports ethical tourism. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to set the tone towards a future trend, which might affect many tourism product owners.

### **Aim of the study**

As alluded to in the previous section, the main thrust of this study is to describe the phenomenon of ethical tourism consumption, the importance of adapting ethical practices and how ethical tourism could affect tourism business in the near future. This study contributes to the ethical tourism literature by outlining the implication of ethical tourism. The next section of this paper provides methodology applied.

### **Methodology**

To gain insight into the concept of ethical tourism, a literature review as a secondary data was adopted in terms of analysis of academic journals. Secondary data is data that has already been collected for other purposes, and it can provide a convenient source from which to answer a research question(s) (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2007:246). No primary data is reported for this paper.

### **Introduction**

The unpredictable nature of tourism makes forecasting an important subject for future success. The society we live in is constantly changing, and the world market of tourism has also undergone dramatic changes in recent years and attention is needed to address these changes as demand usually influences supply (George, 2007:346). Technology has changed information sharing, and tourists buying patterns are also changing, tourist’s attitudes and behaviour are also to an extent shifting. Thus preparation for the future and predicting what is likely to happen in the future, is crucial to the success of the tourism businesses. Forecasting techniques and models have been used extensively in tourism, particularly for tourism demand. Ethical tourism on the other hand is rather a behavioural component, which makes it difficult to measure or predict. According to Hassani, Silva, Antonakakis, Filis & Gupta (2017:114) the empirical literature on forecasting tourism demand shows that models for predictability have not been that good. This paper does not use “models for forecasting” but rather uses literature for analysis of ethical tourism.



Up to the early 1980's the majority of governments were mainly concerned with the economic impacts of tourism, such as employment and exchange revenue (Kasim, 2006:1; Keyser, 2009:345). From an African perspective, tourism is a big industry with the potential to tackle the socioeconomic challenges facing the continent (Frey & George, 2010:622). With its potential then came the realisation that tourism is somehow a double-edge sword. Herein lies the tourism paradox, although tourism generates income for a destination it may also bring the negative socio-cultural, economic and environmental impacts (Theobald, 2012; Mason, 2015). The environmental impacts of tourism became a concern for many destinations, as tourism depends on the environment to thrive. Dube and Nhamo (2018:114) state that in Africa, tourism is almost dependent on nature and any threat to nature could collapse the tourism industry. In essence, tourism relies on the social, cultural and natural environment within which it occurs to operate successfully. This is why the positive impacts must be maximised and the negative impacts minimised.

### **Negative economic, socio-cultural and environmental impacts of tourism**

As mentioned previously tourism is known to provide socio-economic benefits. However, the sector's growth has been a subject of questions pertaining to the negative economic, socio-cultural and environmental impacts. Table 1, illustrates some of the negative economic, socio-cultural and environmental impacts of tourism.

**Table 1: The negative economic, socio-cultural and environmental impacts of tourism**

Impacts
Environmental
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Pollution</li><li>• physical damage to environmental resources</li><li>• Leads to a loss of biodiversity</li><li>• depletion of environmental resources</li></ul>
Socio-cultural/economic
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Decline in morality in society</li><li>• Interference with value systems and religions</li><li>• Commodification of culture</li><li>• Increase in prices</li></ul>

Sources: Pender & Sharpley, 2005; Mason, 2015, Smith, 2014

There is empirical research which supports the existence of the above-mentioned impacts of tourism. For example, the 41 Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) of 2016 to 2017 highlights the challenges within the tourism sector that have negative repercussions for the environment, economy and society. This report is derived from a total of ten countries. The main challenge is sustainable consumption and production, and other challenges mentioned include poverty, human rights and waste management to name but few (United Nations World Tourism Organisation. 2018b:29).

The above-mentioned negative economic, socio-cultural and environmental impacts of tourism are the reasons for the emergence of the concepts such as ethical tourism, responsible tourism, ecotourism and sustainable tourism. As (Lee, Bonn, Reid & Kim, 2017:299) have stated, ethical tourism is a result of a reaction to destructive practices observed as international tourism reached developing countries.

### **Ethical tourism definition**

The detrimental impacts of tourism have given attention to concepts of tourism such as form as ethical tourism. Thus ethical tourism has become a recognised area of tourism research. Ethical tourism, responsible tourism - these are the concepts that are used interchangeably. Both concepts are related to sustainable tourism or often deemed "sustainable tourism-related



terms". Since both concepts are related to sustainability, they will be featured in this paper. The meaning of ethical tourism, both in theory and practice, has been rather debatable. A multitude of definitions exist, and many of these definitions tend to focus on the environment only. For the purpose of this paper, ethical tourism is not only limited to environmental aspect as the socio-cultural and economic aspects are also factored in.

Caruana, Glozer, Crane and McCabe, (2014:115) define ethical tourism as "a broad set of tourist interactions that engage with and benefit local communities and minimize negative social and environmental impacts". The concept of ethical tourism attempts to find a common ground with tourists with doing ensuring that their holiday impact on the environment, culture and the host community is a positive one (England, 2017). Although there is a debate about what ethical tourism is, this form of tourism is a result of a response to harsh and exploitative tourism practices observed (Lee, Bonn, Reid & Kim, 2017:299). Ethical tourism offers "emotional recreation" or a platform for liberation and emancipation driven by a consumer's desire to "feel good" (Goodwin & Francis, 2003:273). Malone, McCabe and Smith, (2014:252) simply describe ethical tourism as "a pleasure-seeking activity". Although a variety of definitions exists, the common thread among these definitions is that ethical tourism is about travel that has a positive impact on the destination visited. Tourism businesses have not really embraced the concept of responsible tourism. The section below provides a brief overview of responsible tourism from a South African perspective.

### **Ethical tourism: South African context**

The tourism industry in South Africa has seen a significant growth since 1994. A number of strategies have been adopted to grow the industry and one of the fundamental strategies is to develop tourism in a sustainable way. South Africa is regarded as one of the leaders of responsible tourism in the world (South African Tourism, 2018). However, South Africa still encounters social and environmental predicaments brought by the travel and tourism industry.

The South African government has made efforts in the past and continues to do so in terms of encouraging tourists and businesses to adopt ethical principles and sustainable behaviour. In 1996, Republic of South Africa (1996) White Paper 'Development and Promotion of Tourism in South Africa' was developed. The paper states that responsible tourism is "not a luxury but a necessity for South Africa". Fast-forward, other initiatives were formulated. In 2011, the National Department of Tourism (NDT, 2018) partnered with the South African National Accreditation System (SANAS), to develop a National Minimum Standard on Responsible Tourism (NMSRT). The NMSRT is "a standard to accredit certification programmes, sometimes referred to as "certifying the certifier". The primary objective was to find a common understanding of responsible tourism.

However, the purpose of this standard is threefold:

Firstly, to establish a collective understanding of the minimum criteria for responsible tourism;

Secondly, to promote responsible tourism within the tourism industry;

Thirdly, in terms of certification for businesses in the tourism industry, to establish the minimum criteria.

In 2002, South Africa hosted the Cape Town Declaration and the Responsible Tourism initiative, (Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism, 2002). The industry has not fully integrated the guidelines which were outlined. Even with the above-mentioned efforts, there is still reluctance from tourism businesses to engage fully. In Frey and George's (2010:621) study, the findings suggest that even though there is a common optimistic attitude with regard to responsible tourism management, tourism businesses in Cape Town are not 'putting their money where their mouths' although the South African government is committed in terms of providing rewards to tourism businesses that practice responsible tourism. A study by Tichaawa and Samhere (2015:411) indicates that such efforts have not yet been enticing



enough for tourism providers. It must be emphasised that the researcher is not implying that all tourism businesses have not 'come to the party' since some have made efforts. In a study conducted by Spenceley (2007:16) on tour operators' responsible tourism practices in South Africa, many alluded to the fact that they "conserved wildlife and natural areas, supported local art, and helped to conserve or restore historical sites".

Even though the majority of tourism business display reluctance, the continual efforts of government might eventually resonate with the consumers of tourism products. Ganglmair-Wooliscroft and Wooliscroft (2016:2712) allude that as governments continue to intensify their marketing efforts on responsible tourism, they present "ethical tourism ideas and opportunities" to tourists. These ideas will eventually lead to tourists taking up ethical behaviours. It is significant that tourism businesses recognise consumers' needs, perceptions and attitudes with regards to ethical tourism practices (Frey & George, 2010:627). Not much has been documented on the responsible tourist typology from a literature perspective, the section below attempts to profile this type of consumer in a limited manner.

### **Profiling responsible consumers**

Almost two decades ago, Krippendorf (1987:174) acknowledged that the needs of tourists are becoming intricate and tourism businesses might have to change their business practices to more ethical practices to meet future demands of the ever-changing markets.

More and more tourists are becoming aware that their travel behaviours and attitudes can have negative impacts on the destinations visited by them and this has resulted in some tourists being more mindful about destination selection. According to Dodds, Graci & Holmes, (2010:218) well-travelled tourists may have witnessed environmental degradation in tourism destinations they have travelled to before. Therefore, this travel experience may prompt them to protect the destination. In essence, this experience leads to tourists seeking environmentally responsible practices. In recent years, a gradual numbers of consumers have begun to scrutinise the reputation and ethical credentials of the companies they support; "they want to have 'guilt-free' vacations" (UNWTO) which also echoes this sentiment by alluding to the fact that visitors want to enjoy their travel experiences and choices in the absence of feeling guilty (2017:52). As more tourists become aware of the negative environmental impacts of tourism, the demand for ecotours increases (Davies & Cahill, 2000:27).

This market in tourism business cannot be ignored. Tourism businesses practising responsible tourism will have a favourable competitive advantage (Responsible Tourism in Cape Town, 2015:17). Below are some of the research examples on tourist preference on quality destinations practicing ethical tourism. In research conducted by Tearfund (2002:5), it was revealed that tourists do not want to have good holiday experiences at the expense of local residents. They rather opt to support tourism businesses companies that can offer ethical practices.

"More than half (52%) of those questioned in a news survey by Tearfund said they would be more likely to book a holiday with a company that had a written code to guarantee good working conditions, protect the environment and support local charities". "Nearly two out of three people (65%) would like to know from travel agents and tour operators how to support the local economy, preserve the environment and behave responsibly when they go on holiday". (Tearfund, 2002:5).

The study by Sustainable Travel International in partnership with Mandala Research (2016), reveals in the last three years, 60% of leisure travellers in the United States have taken a sustainable trip. They take the responsibility of ensuring that their trips do not cause any harm to the local people, the environment, or economy. In a study conducted by (Dodds, *et al*,



2010:220) tourists indicated their awareness and concern for the negative impacts of tourism and have also highlighted that this concern had an impact on their vacation.

Although many travellers are still oblivious to the negative impact of tourism. The researcher forecasts that Generation x (GenXers) will have more information about the impacts and will make ethical travel decisions in the future. According to Morrison (2013:420), GenXers make use of social media to obtain information on travel information and also to make bookings. In a study conducted by Buffa (2015:14042) the findings indicated that young people are interested in aspects of sustainability and reveal a certain influence on their motivations, behaviours' the decisions they make. When comparing inexperienced tourists with experienced tourists, the latter seem to embrace socio-cultural and environmental issues more (Lee *et al*, 2017:305).

According to Pender and Sharpley (2005:300), price, weather and infrastructure are the primary factors considered by tourists when booking a holiday. However, ethical factors are considered by tourists when two tourism companies offering the same product are compared.

Ethical tourist behaviour comprises of different activities. This could range from not littering, to using available recycling facilities, to choosing a lodging facility with an environmental accreditation (Ganglmair-Wooliscroft & Wooliscroft, 2016:2712). Emotions also play an important role in influencing consumers' behavioural intentions, (Hosany & Gilbert, 2010:513). In a study conducted by (Malone, McCabe & Smith, 2014:241) the findings indicated that experiences that are based on emotions are powerful motivators of consumers' ethical choices.

Lee *et al*, (2017:300) state that tourists who perceive ethical issues to be important are most likely to be apprehensive concerning ethical issues affecting the visited destination, thus contributing to positive actions. Tourists respond ethically to what concerns them the most as there are different levels of concern when it comes to ethical travel issues (Gao, Huang & Zhang, 2016). Some studies have simply dismissed the idea of a responsible tourist. For instance, in a study conducted by Caruana *et al*, (2014:128) the findings indicate that tourists are more "fluid" when it comes to their stance around responsible tourism. In essence, the study suggests that the segment of responsible tourists is nothing but a myth. Given the trends in empirical research provided in this paper, the researcher argues that a responsible tourist exists. Although this type of tourist is not yet a mainstream item. Even the United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) (2018a:23) recognises a "responsible traveller" by providing the responsible travel tips to travellers in order to increase understanding and awareness of the impact of tourist activities on places visited.

### **Business implications**

Tourism companies are not paying attention to the 'ethically driven' type of consumer; this is due to the fact that consumers rarely 'walk the talk' themselves. Globally, about 2% of tourism businesses are participating in responsible tourism (Frey & George, 2010:261). It is stated in the Tourism and the Sustainable Development Goals report that not many tourism policymakers are involved in Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations World Tourism Organisation, 2018b:11). This is in both first and third world countries and this is a missed opportunity. There is a gap that exists between the intention and the behaviour of a tourism consumer. Currently, there is a lack of understanding on the part of the majority of tourists pertaining to the social and environmental impacts of tourism and no knowledge on how their attitude and behaviour could bring needed positive changes (Miller, Rathouse, Scarles, Holmes & Tribe, 2010:365). This is the reason why many tourism businesses are not really bothered about the issue. The researcher does not entirely forecast that this will be a solid niche market, however, the consumer's behaviour and attitude towards caring for the environment and the society visited will eventually force companies to adopt sustainable practices once the notion of ethical practice tourism goes mainstream.



Destination managers need to constantly keep up with the market trends because tourists are changing and so are their behaviours (Morrison, 2017:573). From a general business perspective, it is important for any business to understand consumer demands and tourism is by no means an exception. There have been questions as to whether companies really care about ethical or responsible practices. This question is neither here nor there, and Weeden (2002:143) states that incorporating ethical practices could be a competitive advantage for a business where two companies are compared. Companies that adhere to ethical management practices yield brand loyalty and meet customer expectations (George, 2007:332).

Tourism businesses will soon have to display their sustainability certifications and credentials when promoting their businesses. This will become a selling point and many organisations are already doing that. There is already what is known as LOHAS, this is an acronym for “Lifestyles of Health and Sustainability”. LOHAS defines a type of consumer that tries to find a healthier and more sustainable lifestyle, product and service options (LOHAS, 2015). This type of consumer’s way of living and purchasing decisions is influenced by their values concerning personal, family and community health, environmental sustainability and social justice. Tourism companies that have already established responsible/ethical practices will have an added advantage. According to Tsuk (2017), founder and Chief Experience Officer at BookGreener, travellers will always use price, location and facilities as a criterion for accommodation. In essence, sustainability is not a criterion, but in most cases it is the key reason why guests do in fact return to a destination.

The ethical tourism market remains relatively small. This type of tourism is not yet a mainstream, and not enough mainstream tourism businesses take it seriously enough. Early birds in this tourism area will yield the best results in the future. According to (United Nations World Tourism Organisation, 2018b:48) there is a demand for sustainable business conduct and the actions of these businesses are the critical success factors for customer experience and satisfaction.

The tourism product owners will need to show full commitment to responsible tourism, which is a big part of sustainability. The responsible tourism they undertake must be integrated into business activities, so as to improve business competitiveness. This can also be achieved by adopting responsible business models. Some of the practices that can be deployed by tourism businesses is to ensure responsible tourism in the form of providing of employment that is decent and fair to the local people and also to ensure that the economic benefits of tourism are retained within the community in which the business is located. Companies such as tour operators could package sustainable products that meets customers’ needs, whilst also taking local cultures and the environment into consideration (United Nations World Tourism Organisation, 2018b:51).

## **Conclusion**

This paper explored the concept of ethical tourism from a literature perspective in terms of ethical consumers and what this may mean for tourism businesses in the future. This paper proved inconclusively that an ethical market exists, but proved that a responsible tourist is not a myth. Many travellers recognise the necessity of ethical tourism. The paper highlighted the importance of tourism businesses in investing in ethical practices for their business to be sustainable. Tourism business providers should be concerned about their lack of responsible practices as the consumer’s preference of ethical practices is growing. While this paper looked at the concern regarding lack of ethical practices from tourism businesses and what this means for the future, it did not use forecast models or techniques. Future research is required for a market analysis to ascertain the volume of ethical tourists seeking ethical travel experiences, and the number of tourism businesses with ethical practices. There is also a need to seek to examine the challenges preventing business from committing to ethical tourism practices.



There is a predictable link between tourism businesses practices and responsible consumers. The tourism industry should commit to ethical/responsible tourism, not only because of the forecast for this market but because it is about safeguarding and improving the future of the tourism industry. The businesses also stand to benefit as there are cost savings due to sustainable practices and they also get positive brand recognition. Ethical tourism should not be an option for businesses and the adaptation of responsible tourism practices by businesses should not be influenced by the demand for it. The lack of commitment from business will soon force government to deploy regulations which will ultimately force tourism businesses to comply. This lack of responsible tourism practices in tourism planning and development is a key concern and indicates the need for tourism businesses to prioritise the socio-cultural, economic and environmental impacts of tourism in their daily business practices.

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