VALUES OF ECOTOURISM IN AN URBAN SETTING: HONG KONG

CHAN Josiah T. Y.
Lecturer

Division of Social Studies
The Community College of City University
The City University of Hong Kong
Hong Kong
Abstract

Despite possessing the favorable conditions needed for ecotourism, such as an abundance of natural beauty and biodiversity (AFCD, 2010), Hong Kong has achieved only limited success in ecotourism development in terms of business potential and increasing tourist arrivals (McKercher & Chan, 2002; McKercher & Fu, 2006; Chan et al., 2008). Some argued that ecotourism in Hong Kong is not feasible. However, the Hong Kong Tourism Board (HKTB) is still promoting this niche sector aggressively (HKTB, 2010). The author reviewed the phenomenon and identified some possible values for HKTB’s investment in eco-tourism promotion in Hong Kong - increased awareness towards the environment and anti-pollution issues, expanded biodiversity as a result of the limitation of destructive development projects and enhancement of environmental conservation programmes, and the increasing popularity of recreational activities in the territory. If the benefits of developing ecotourism in an urban setting often extend to the entire local community, rather than just significantly contributing to the industry itself (Walpole & Goodwin, 2000; He et al., 2008; Stem et al., 2003). Then the value of ecotourism should be studied widely from various perspectives. This study adopted a qualitative approach, through several in-depth interviews to explore the value of ecotourism in Hong Kong within and beyond the tourism sector. The possible business model for ecotourism service provider was explored.

Keywords: Urban ecotourism, Hong Kong, Benefit and cost, Value

Introduction

Donohoe and Needham (2006) updated the contemporary definition of ecotourism upon some fundamental beliefs, namely nature based, preservation and conservation, education, sustainability, as well as ethics/responsibility/awareness and distribution of benefits to the community or others. The agenda of ecotourism in western countries covered beyond the tourism sector. In Hong Kong, however, the discussion was mostly about the resources and their sustainability (Mckercher & Fu, 2006), the marketability in relation to destination management (Mckercher & Chan, 2002), or business opportunity (Chan et al., 2008). Relatively limited research concerning the broader goals and aspirations of ecotourism from a community perspective, as proposed by Moscardo (2008), has been conducted. By conceptualizing tourism as a tool to support the long-term development of a destination, the value of ecotourism in an urban setting could be extended to its potential benefits to the overall community, the environment or the destination. As it has been suggested in previous studies that
the financial motivation for eco-tourism development in Hong Kong was insignificant, the macro view could be a better reason to support ecotourism

**Literature Review**

From the community perspective, Weaver (2001a) believed ecotourism generating numerous beneficial impacts for the host communities, tourists and environments. Some examples included the conservation, sustainable development opportunities, education and revenue for governments to implement management and protection systems. Stem et al. (2003) believed ecotourism could be effectively used as a broader conservation strategy And although referring to rural tourism, Ohe (2008) stated that tourism served not only environmental functions, but also cultural and social functions such as recreational and educational functions, which could also be applied to urban setting. Pickering et al. (2007) also reassured that ecotourism development benefited the community as a whole, although they acknowledged the fact that increasing number of travelers inevitably caused negative impacts to the environment. From Higgins-Desbiolles’s (2009) point of view, ecotourism could foster transformations in ecological consciousness leading to a sustainable human-environmental relationship. All the above arguments were consistent with Stronza (2007) that ecotourism was not merely an economic tool for conservation, but also the cause of new values and social relations. In other words, the true value of ecotourism could relate to a wider variety of issues, including economic, environmental, societal and cultural issues in a community.

From the industry’s perspective, the mass tourism market could benefit ecotourism by providing a diversified choice in soft ecotourism mode accommodating the ‘green’ trend (Weaver, 2001b), while ecotourism also benefited from the mass market through its supply of a large number of clientele generating economic of scales amendable to sustainability. However, in Walpole & Goodwin’s (2000) example from Indonesia, they criticized ecotourism activity benefit mostly external operators and urban residents, rather than rural residents who were the direct suppliers. He et al. (2008) also observed similar disproportional benefit distribution among stakeholders in China. From these studies, one could conclude that ecotourism was related beyond the tourism industry, although the cost and benefit to other sectors remained ambiguous.

Silva and McDill (2004) observed a number of barriers for the success of ecotourism business, namely enterprise, agency, host community, and networks. Small business owners often had difficulties reaching the target markets because of the lack of marketing skill or high cost of advertising. On the contrary, utilizing government
funding to develop website together with interactive map guide and podcasting made Montreal a popular destination for geo-tourism (Verner et al., 2009). Nowadays, the promotion of tourism products had become multidirectional. Internet has proven to be a popular information source for ecotourists (Donohoe & Needham, 2008). This implied that promotion of ecotourism products on the internet could be effective to attract travelers.

Methodology

This study, as an exploratory research, adopted a qualitative approach to reach an initial understanding on the value of ecotourism in Hong Kong. Relevant literatures relating to ecotourism in an urban setting were reviewed to provide the background of this study. A non-structured questionnaire was developed based on an extensive review of tourism-related literatures. The questionnaire was designed for use as an outline to gather opinion from stakeholders of ecotourism in Hong Kong. The questionnaire consisted of two sections. The first section reviewed the current development of ecotourism in Hong Kong, with a particular focus on the community involvement in ecotourism activities. The second section aimed at gathering information about the broader benefits of ecotourism beyond the tourism industry. Another aim was to generate insight for possible business model of ecotourism service provider from interviewees’ opinion.

Data were collected through five interviewees (Table 1) who were stakeholders associated with the ecotourism sector in Hong Kong. All interviews were conducted in September and October 2010, each of which lasted for 30 to 40 minutes. All interviews were taped and transcribed. The interviewees were purposefully selected to gauge various stakeholders’ opinions.

The first interviewee was a professional photographer with particular interest in scenery at ecotourism destinations. By participating in ecotourism activities, he has accumulated extensive knowledge about the ecotourism destination and had understanding of local participants. The second interviewee was a public relations expert in the tourism field. He has been engaged in organizing ecotourism and cultural activities, teaching related tourism courses, and hosting tourism portal and online-forum. He established an ecotourism association because of personal interest some years ago (when?). The third interviewee was a university lecturer whose focus of study at postgraduate level was in ecotourism and biodiversity. He had over eight years’ practical experience in leading eco-tours and training eco-guides, therefore his opinions reflected both eco-guides and trainers. The fourth interviewee was a
management staff working in a tour operator offering eco-tours for incoming tourists, local citizens, and schools. She previously worked in a non-governmental organization specializing in ecotourism and cultural tourism. The last interviewee was a postgraduate student undertaking academic research in related discipline. He occasionally joined the eco-tours and worked as freelance reporter to updates trends of the tourism industry in Hong Kong.

**Findings**

**Recent ecotourism development**

The ecotourism market made up of two major types of clienteles: domestic tourists and inbound tourists. One interviewee observed that domestic demand for ecotourism products has rejuvenated recently because of the establishment of geo-parks in Hong Kong. The number of local tours visiting geo-parks reached historical high. One of the reasons was because locals thought geo-park tours were a trendy activity to join. Occasionally there were some travellers with a keen interest to learn more about rock formation and environmental conservation, but most considered geo-park tours as sightseeing activities that was fun, with limited consideration to their educational and conservational values.

There were a few reasons contributing to the popularity of geo-park tours. Firstly, the government promoted the geo-parks aggressively, particularly after declaring the possibility of application to be part of national geo-parks. Geo-tourism, being part of ecotourism, could possibly be a major attraction outstanding the territory in the future. Secondly, the government has been very vigorous in regulating the issuance of license to qualified guides for leading geo-park tours. Some local guides were motivated to take on professional development so as to be qualified to escort relevant tours. There was also economic motivation involved as qualified guides could earn a higher income. Interestingly, eco-tours involving other activities in the territory were apparently becoming less popular. Such a difference could be proof that Hong Kong citizens followed trends closely, and therefore, the sustainability of geo-tours after the trend was of concern.

**Ecotourism in relation to tourism industry**

Ecotourism activities among local participants were mostly for leisure only, and did not bear any education or conservation label. The participants usually only aimed for a walk in the countryside and a taste of fresh air. There were experienced tourists who
expected more from various types of ecotourism activities. They were well-coordinated among themselves; some even formed interest groups focusing on destinations of particular ecological importance. They had self-arranged eco-tours. Looking at economic benefits, ‘expert tourists’ would not generate financial gain for the tourism industry, and financial gain from local ‘amateur’ participants were insignificant to the industry either. On the other hand, possible negative effects of tourism activities brought about by local tourists to the natural environment of eco-tourism destinations raised our concern.

The inbound ecotourism market was still insignificant. Some operators serving Taiwan, Japan, and Korea markets promoted ecotourism in Hong Kong, creating a niche market including eco-tours in addition to the regular itinerary. The number of travelers was still small, but it was delightful to see the awareness of alternative types of tourism experience starting to grow in specific markets. Some tourists from the above mentioned countries decided to travel on individual basis for different reasons. They neither paid for tour fee nor arranged eco-tours through travel agents; their duration of stay could possibly be extended resulting in an increased spending in other sectors in the city.

An interviewee pointed out that a small number of travel agencies serving inbound Caucasian travelers have started to provide eco-tours as an alternative activity in Hong Kong. The initial feedback has been encouraging as a minority group of repeated travelers were keen to experience another aspect of urbanized Hong Kong. The feedback from cruise travelers was promising as well; with occasionally a full bus of travelers was escorted to visit the countryside or hiking trails in Sai Kung, Luk Keng and Sam Mui Tsai in Tai Po.

Possible business model for ecotourism

Similar to the research conducted by Chan et al. (2008), interviewee’s feedback indicated that the inbound ecotourism market was barely surviving with an extremely low demand and supply, although the awareness of tourists from Taiwan, Japan, and Korea markets were slowing increasing. The number of travellers and business volume were still insufficient to support a sizable eco-tour operator to survive.

However, some nature-loving foreigners who have been living in Hong Kong for many years set up their own small-scale travel agency or even home-based travel agency. They usually promoted their services on websites and through social marketing channels like facebook and twitter. The websites featuring beautiful photos
of the natural sceneries, feedback of participants, as well as eco-tour products available have successfully attracted some foreigners to join these tours. Most participants were individual travelers in small groups seeking exceptional travel experiences.

Two interviewees with experience in managing travel agencies admitted that one-man agency or home-based agency bearing a low overhead could be a sustainable business model for ecotourism sector. On one hand as the agents were nature lovers who enjoyed nature-based activities, their escorting motivation were out of genuine love for nature and seeking fun and discovery; financial reward was not their major motivation. On the other hand, they have resided in the rural areas for some years, where the cost of living were relatively lower compared to those living in downtown city, therefore their understanding of the surrounding rural environment, their relationship with local community, as well as their mentality towards ecotourism business were significantly different from ‘regular businessmen’. They also understood the needs and wants of travelers better than the locals. As a result, their escorting services came out to match perfectly with the travelers’ need of real ecotourism experience.

**Ecotourism beyond tourism industry**

As suggested by the interviewees, the tourists arranging eco-tours on their own could possibly benefit the overall community through extended stay and spending in commercial sectors. Most importantly, their positive word-of-mouth about the beautiful scenery, favorable travel experience in Hong Kong, or even improving perceived destination image on top of the urbanized city would be important to attract more tourists to visit Hong Kong.

An interviewee observed that ecotourism in the educational market was expanding. There have already been several operators that have arranged inspection trips for training up school teachers in disciplines of geography, biology, or general education. The teachers who were trained would later arrange similar activities for their students for the purpose of enhancing their understanding of the subject. Such activities would not only arouse students’ interest in the subjects, but also enhance their awareness towards environmental protection.

When compared to a few years ago, travelers nowadays were more educated in ecotourism etiquettes. Most of the travelers were well aware of the rules and regulations in the countryside, and therefore would not cause damages, produce
pollution or create disturbance during ecotourism activities. Although there was rarely proactive action to conserve and protect the environment, there were at least few destructive actions thus minimizing the impact to the environment. The experience of joining ecotourism activities undoubtedly played a role in educating a group of environmental-friendly citizens.

The increasing awareness towards environmental protection was further reflected by the increasing financial supports from commercial bodies. A number of non-profit making organizations gained support to initiate ecotourism activities for the less privileged groups, or to organize projects focusing on environmental protection. These activities were introduced to secondary and primary school students, allowing them to visit the rural area in Hong Kong, to learn about heritage conservation, or to understand the importance of recycling. The benefits to the environment in the long run could be initiated through these channels.

**Value of ecotourism**

Although the significant economic benefits of ecotourism to the tourism industry were yet to be proven, the value of ecotourism to Hong Kong in other aspects should not be underestimated.

With the strategic development of geo-parks, the locals gained better understanding about the natural assets available in the territory. The commitment to develop geo-parks pitched at the national or international standard could provide further support and reputation for ecotourism development. Undoubtedly, the governance of the parks and regulation of geo-tour guides could be the first step to initiate upgrading of standards of ecotourism guides in various sectors, namely bird watching, planting, or even cultural sector. Moreover, the development of some SSSI sites were closely monitored as a result of raised awareness in preservation of the environment. The temporarily suspension of residential projects at the precious Marine Park - Hoi Ha Wan in Sai Kung was an example.

Hong Kong’s urbanized image as a whole made it less appealing to be demanded as an ecotourism destination. The urban image was contradictory to the traditional concept of ecotourism destinations where rural and green environment should be expected. Although two of the interviewees observed that there have been a gradual increase in the number of inbound tourists visiting the countryside in Hong Kong, most of these travellers discovered the natural elements by themselves using basic information obtained from guide books or HKTB leaflets. An interviewee stated that
the short lifecycle of ecotourism products made it detrimental for its development, as referred travellers may be deterred to join similar activities despite good recommendation from previous travellers. HKTB’s promotion was delivered and a minority group of tourists were attached; unfortunately, the suitable tour products were unavailable in the market.

All interviewees supported that ecotourism should be positioned to supplement the mass tourism activities for inbound tourists, particularly for repeated travelers and well-educated nature lovers. The availability of ecotourism would undoubtedly upgrade the destination image, and rectify the negative perceptions towards the air pollution (Law & Cheung, 2007) in urbanized destination.

**Discussions and Conclusion**

Consolidating the interviewees’ opinions, ecotourism was a potential niche tourism sector which was instrumental in improving the overall destination attractiveness in an urban setting. Unlike destinations like the indigenous community in Peru (Stronza, 2007), Hong Kong’s ecotourism sector should not only aim at generating economic benefits. Business opportunities were available to small-scale operators bearing limited financial burden, as they could also make good use of the ‘free’ resources like promotion through internet. The community would not change rapidly because of the introduction of ecotourism; however, the existence of such a niche tourism sector would benefit the community as a whole in a progressive pace.

All in all, the ecotourism sector, although seemed insignificant compared to the tourism industry, the overall community and the overall environment or destination (Figure 1), was an important component to form the whole picture in Hong Kong. Therefore, the development of ecotourism should not be limited within the tourism industry. Instead, the overall development of Hong Kong as a tourist destination, with the co-existence of urban setting with a huge population, and amazing environmental value, should be considered.
The government should position ecotourism beyond the tourism industry, making it an attraction in this urban setting. With Peru case as an example (Stronza, 2007), the economical benefit for developing ecotourism to the tourism industry was limited, but the environmental, social and cultural benefits, as well as some intangible values like improved destination image, citizens’ perception towards the city and community commitment were far beyond mere economic gain. The value of ecotourism in Hong Kong should be studied from a macro perspective in order to develop a strategic direction for further sustainable development.

Acknowledgement

The author wishes to acknowledge the valuable opinions provided by the five interviewees from various perspectives, and comments offered by the anonymous reviewers.

References


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Primary role</th>
<th>Additional role</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mr. S.M. Chan</td>
<td>Eco-tour destination scenery photographer</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. K. Chung</td>
<td>Public relations expert in the tourism field</td>
<td>Ecotourism association organizer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. L. Cheung</td>
<td>Lecturer at academic institution</td>
<td>Ecotourism course trainer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Q. Wong</td>
<td>Eco-tour operator</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. E. Cheuk</td>
<td>Freelance reporter and editor of tourism trade publications</td>
<td>Research student majoring in tourism</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>