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# Adult Learning in Community-Based Ecotourism

Pierre Walter, University of British Columbia, Canada

***Abstract:*** *This paper examines the sites, processes and curriculum of adult learning in community-based ecotourism (CBE). It compares different forms of CBE; elaborates on community learning for capacity building, on the ecotourism curriculum, and on learning processes; and identifies areas in need of further research.*

## Introduction

Since the United Nations declaration of 2002 as the *International Year of Ecotourism* and the *World Ecotourism Summit* in Québec in the same year, ecotourism has become a prominent global strand of sustainable development. The hope is that ecotourism projects, as development initiatives, can at once help preserve the natural environment, provide a source of livelihood for local people, and protect local and indigenous cultures. Ideally, ecotourists who travel to natural areas will have minimal environmental impact, increase their environmental awareness, contribute resources to local communities and embody practices respectful of local culture (Björk, 2007). In the spirit of cross-cultural exchange and understanding, ecotourism will also foster human rights and promote activism in democratic movements (Honey, 2008). Further, it is hoped that indigenous ecotourism will support economic development and self-determination for indigenous peoples (Zeppel, 2006), and all forms of community-based ecotourism will empower women (Scheyvens, 2007).

Adult learning plays a prominent role in all forms of ecotourism (Donohue & Needham, 2006; Weaver & Lawton, 2007), but is particularly important in community-based forms. For community members hosting ecotourists, learning centers on building capacity for a locally-controlled community development project (Denman, 2001; Suansri, 2004). They must learn cross-cultural skills in communication, conflict resolution, safety and political advocacy, develop environmental conservation strategies to involve outside visitors, train ecotourism guides, and design an informal ecotourism teaching curriculum for ecotourists, based largely on local knowledge (Walter, 2009). For visitors to community-based ecotourism projects, learning focuses on gaining knowledge of wildlife, local ecosystems, natural attractions, livelihood and culture; it may also increase environmental awareness, and often involves participation in environmental conservation initiatives and political activism (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2009). All of these activities involve ample adult learning, both individually and in collective forms. However, the many forms of adult learning in community-based ecotourism have seldom been the subject of theorizing or empirical research. This paper reviews current research on community-based ecotourism and adult learning, and identifies areas in need of further research.

The empirical base of this study is the available published research on community-based ecotourism since the early 1990s, when the term “ecotourism” first began to regularly appear in the literature. The author also draws on his own research on two community-based ecotourism ventures; one comprising a community nature reserve, small museum and cultural activities in a Hani (Akha) village in Xishuangbanna, China (Walter, 2004), and the second an ecotourism and homestay project in a Muslim Malay fishing village in Southern Thailand (Walter, 2009). To date, very sparse research on learning in ecotourism has been reported in journals in Adult

Education. For the present paper, journals reviewed include the *Journal of Environmental Education*, *Environmental Education Research*, *Community Development Journal*, *Environment, Development and Sustainability*, *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, *Journal of Travel Research*, *Progress in Tourism and Hospitality Research*, *Tourism Management* and the *Journal of Ecotourism*. Conference proceedings in ecotourism management, environmental education and sustainable development were also be reviewed. Finally, books and edited collections reviewed include: Stonza & Durham (2008), *Ecotourism and conservation in the Americas*; Zeppel (2006), *Indigenous ecotourism: sustainable development and management*; Higham (2007) *Critical issues in ecotourism*; Buckley (2003) *Case Studies in ecotourism*; and Honey (2008) *Ecotourism and sustainable development*.

### **What is Community-based Ecotourism?**

There are many forms of ecotourism, some of which are clearly beneficial to local communities and peoples, others of which are less so, and still others which can be largely destructive. Western concepts and practices of ecotourism may disrupt and degrade local and indigenous cultural and social practices (Colchester 2004), indigenous and local peoples may be forcibly removed from their traditional territories in natural areas (Dowie, 2009), denied access to customary lands and resources or marketed as exotic cultural attractions for outside visitors (Pleumaron 1996). In the global ecotourism industry, profits may be exported away from national and local communities, and local people only marginally employed in low skill, low paying service jobs (Honey, 2008).

Criticisms of ecotourism are based largely on who controls and who benefits from ecotourism. Transnational corporate airlines, resort chains, cruise lines and travel agencies have not only taken the lion's share of profits in the ecotourism industry, but for the most part have also exported profits away from national and local sites (Honey, 2008). Local people are often only marginally employed in low skill, low paying service jobs in the ecotourism industry, while higher paid managerial and tourism staff is imported from abroad. "Ecowashing" of conventional mass tourism as a "green" marketing tool may mean that the environmental and cultural impact of ecotourism is in reality quite destructive, even while it is portrayed as "green" and "eco-friendly."

Participatory or community-based approaches to ecotourism generally offer the best hope for community-controlled, equitable and sustainable development. Honey (2008) calls this grassroots form of ecotourism "authentic" ecotourism; others name it "community-based tourism" (Suansri 2004). It also has roots in "indigenous ecotourism" (Zeppel, 2006). Common to all forms are: (a) principles of local participation, control or ownership of ecotourism initiatives; (b) a focus on environmental conservation and local livelihood benefits; (c) the promotion of customary and indigenous cultures; and to some extent, (d) the promotion of local and indigenous human rights and sovereignty over traditional territories and resources (Figure 1). For the purposes of this paper, this common core will be characterized as "Community-based Ecotourism." In moving from Authentic Ecotourism to Indigenous Ecotourism, it is clear that there is a shift from an overriding concern with preserving the natural environment (Honey) to a greater focus on promoting the sovereignty of local people over their land and culture (Zeppel). Honey's Authentic Ecotourism, posited as an alternative to mass ecotourism, may in fact be managed by outside tour operators, businesses or NGOs as long as these initiatives respect local culture, do not damage the natural environment, build environmental awareness, benefit local people, help to empower them in partnerships, and support their human rights. By contrast,

Suansri’s version of Community-based Tourism includes similar principles, but begins with the local community itself: it is largely a form of grassroots community development (not an enlightened “green” business partnership) which promotes local cultural, livelihood and environmental conservation through ecotourism. Lastly, Zeppel’s characterization of Indigenous Ecotourism then explicitly focuses on community control and ownership of ecotourism as a strategy to maintain and promote sovereignty rights to land and resources, and to strengthen indigenous culture and livelihood.

Figure 1. Variations of CBE

<b>“Authentic” Ecotourism</b> Honey (2008)	<b>Community-based Tourism</b> Suansri (2004)	<b>Indigenous Ecotourism</b> Zeppel (2006)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Involves travel to natural destinations</li> <li>▪ Minimizes environmental and cultural impact</li> <li>▪ Builds environmental awareness</li> <li>▪ Provides direct financial benefits for conservation</li> <li>▪ Provides financial benefits and empowerment for local people</li> <li>▪ Respects local culture</li> <li>▪ Supports human rights and democratic movements</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Recognize, support and promote community ownership of tourism</li> <li>▪ Involve community members from the start in every aspect</li> <li>▪ Promote community pride</li> <li>▪ Improve the quality of life</li> <li>▪ Ensure environmental sustainability</li> <li>▪ Preserve the unique character and culture of the local area</li> <li>▪ Foster cross-cultural learning</li> <li>▪ Respect cultural differences and human dignity</li> <li>▪ Distribute benefits fairly among community members</li> <li>▪ Contribute a fixed percentage of income to community projects</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Based on indigenous knowledge systems and values</li> <li>▪ Promotes indigenous customary practices and livelihoods</li> <li>▪ Used to retain rights to access, manage and use traditional lands and resources</li> <li>▪ Used to manage cultural property such as historic and sacred sites</li> <li>▪ Operates under the control and active participation of local indigenous people</li> <li>▪ Involves indigenous communities in ecotourism planning, development and operation</li> <li>▪ Terms of trade are negotiated for the use of ecotourism resources, including people</li> </ul>

In general terms, Authentic Tourism keeps the focus of the ecotourism experience on building environmental awareness and promoting conservation among ecotourists, but strives to respect, involve and empower local people as much as possible. Community-based Tourism (CBT) as the name implies, starts not with a mandate to preserve wilderness (as is the case with Authentic Ecotourism), but with people living within nature: forest societies, fishing communities, subsistence farmers, and so on, many of whom occupy some of the most

spectacularly beautiful regions on earth, now under threat of outside development. The cornerstone of this approach is community development, but it also promotes the cross-cultural education of ecotourists: “Community-based Tourism is tourism that takes environmental, social and cultural sustainability into account. It is managed and owned by the community, with the purpose of enabling visitors to increase their awareness and learn about the community and local ways of life” (Suansri, 2004, p. 14). That is, CBT normally encompasses not only ecotourism, but also “ethno-tourism.” Under CBT, local community members are understood as caretakers of natural areas, and as cultural, environmental and livelihood experts. As such, they are the obvious choice for employment as tour operators, guides, hosts and educators for outside visitors. Their homes, transport systems (boats, bikes, motorcycles, buses, walking trails), local foods and handicrafts also replace the infrastructure of industry tourism (hotels, travel agents, restaurants, souvenir stores), and profits stay in the local community. Since local people depend on the natural environment as their source of traditional livelihood (for farming, fishing, hunting, collection of food, medicines, building materials, etc.), they have a large stake in protecting it from harm. This helps to ensure that people and the natural environment will come before tourism industry profits.

Finally, Indigenous Ecotourism is similarly posited as an alternative to mass tourism, and as a means of economic development, environmental conservation, cultural preservation and the education of outside ecotourists (Zeppel, 2006; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2009). However, it is also framed as a strategy to retain and gain land, intellectual and cultural property rights; to access, manage and use traditional lands and resources; and in general, to promote self-determination and sovereignty for indigenous communities and nations. Ideally, Indigenous Ecotourism should serve as a buttress against increasing incursions of the non-indigenous global tourism industry onto traditional territories, against the packaging and commodification of indigenous culture, biodiversity, people and nature by the tour operators and park services, and against the unfettered development of tourism infrastructure in indigenous natural areas. It should be controlled and managed by indigenous communities and foster their spiritual, cultural and physical connections to the land, on their own terms (Zeppel, 2006).

### **Curriculum and learning processes in CBE**

Community-based ecotourism is an important pedagogical site of social movement learning (Hall & Turay, 2006). Informal adult learning and nonformal education has a critical role in community-based ecotourism, for both local communities and visiting ecotourists. Communities must engage in capacity building for ecotourism projects: they must learn about project planning and management, hosting and guiding, environmental management and communication (Figure 2). Generally, this is accomplished in training workshops and site visits sponsored by NGOs and government (Denman, 2002; Suansri, 2004). They must also develop an ecotourism curriculum and consider what learning processes they plan to employ. Pedagogy usually includes traditional forms of hands-on guidance and apprenticeship for livelihood activities, interpretation by guides, transmission of cultural knowledge through storytelling and rituals, language and cultural exchange, and participation in a variety of ecotourism activities such as hiking and boating. It may also encompass a more radical, transformative pedagogy designed to raise ecotourists’ awareness of injustices against indigenous and local people, of environmental degradation, colonialism, corporate capitalism and cultural commodification. The nonformal “curriculum” of ecotourism generally encompasses environmental, cultural and livelihood knowledge. These are separated in Figure 2 for ease of explanation; but in fact they

are all intertwined together: livelihood activities are also conservation activities (knowing when to leave young fish and where not to harvest seaweeds to allow regrowth; multicropping and intercropping fields; stripping tree bark so that it does not kill the tree), and cultural activities (offering a ritual thanks for food or materials to living water, mountain or tree spirits, believing oneself to be part of nature rather than existing outside it). Finally, curriculum resources may include visitor ecotourism information and heritage centers, nature reserves, museums, brochures, pamphlets, websites, and various other interpretive displays, signage, and maps.

Figure 2. Community capacity building, ecotourism curriculum and learning processes

Community Capacity Building	Ecotourism Curriculum	Learning Processes
<p><u>Project planning and management</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ project planning and product development issues</li> <li>▪ transport and supply systems</li> <li>▪ reservations system</li> <li>▪ pricing, marketing, bookkeeping, loans and credit, financial control</li> <li>▪ cooperative, management, conflict-resolution, evaluation skills</li> <li>▪ legal rights and issues</li> </ul> <p><u>Hosting and guiding</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ guide and host training</li> <li>▪ handling visitors, customer care and hospitality skills</li> <li>▪ accommodation and homestay: design, privacy, sanitation, safety</li> <li>▪ health and medical care, first aid, cross-cultural communication, codes of conduct, cultural norms</li> <li>▪ language training</li> </ul> <p><u>Environmental management</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ environmental conservation and management systems, waste disposal</li> </ul> <p><u>Communication</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ communication, networking, internet skills</li> <li>▪ political skills</li> <li>▪ protest and organizing skills</li> <li>▪ working and negotiating with outside interests: government</li> </ul>	<p><u>Environmental knowledge</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ biodiversity</li> <li>▪ environmental ethics and ecological stewardship</li> <li>▪ climate, geography, navigation, astronomy</li> <li>▪ wildlife, birdlife, fish, marine life</li> <li>▪ herbal medicines, foods, building materials, other Non-Timber Forest Products</li> <li>▪ plants, trees, mushrooms, flowers, corals</li> </ul> <p><u>Cultural knowledge</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ history</li> <li>▪ cultural heritage</li> <li>▪ lifeways</li> <li>▪ language, customs &amp; beliefs</li> <li>▪ art, music and spirituality</li> <li>▪ cosmology</li> <li>▪ religion, sports</li> </ul> <p><u>Livelihood</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ animal husbandry</li> <li>▪ agriculture</li> <li>▪ orchards</li> <li>▪ fisheries</li> <li>▪ silviculture</li> </ul>	<p><u>Hands-on, experiential learning</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ homestay program: cooking, sharing meals, living with a local family, learning local language, customs and beliefs</li> <li>▪ canoeing, kayaking, fishing, spelunking, skin diving, hiking, wildlife viewing, bird watching, rock climbing, camping</li> <li>▪ participation in livelihood/ cultural activities: beading, batik, weaving, storytelling, dance, festivals, ceremonies, travel to sacred and cultural sites; farming, cooking, fishing, gathering forest foods, hunting, running trap lines</li> </ul> <p><u>Transformative and decolonizing pedagogies:</u> Eco-humanism and indigenous ontologies and epistemologies. Raise awareness of environmental degradation and cultural genocide:</p>

<p>agencies, NGOs, commercial operators, real estate speculators &amp; developers, academics, media</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ fruit, vegetable and herbal gardens</li> <li>▪ food processing</li> </ul> <p><u>Curriculum resources</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ visitor information centers</li> <li>▪ heritage interpretation centers</li> <li>▪ community nature reserves</li> <li>▪ community museums</li> <li>▪ brochures, pamphlets</li> <li>▪ photographs, videos, websites</li> <li>▪ information packets</li> <li>▪ displays, signage, maps</li> </ul>	<p>removal policies, land theft, racism, colonialism, corporate capitalism, current threats.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ interpretation, mentoring and storytelling by guides, indigenous experts and elders</li> <li>▪ visits to natural attractions &amp; degraded areas</li> <li>▪ participation in conservation and community development projects &amp; political protests</li> <li>▪ living with families</li> <li>▪ consultations with elders</li> </ul>
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*Sources:* Victurine, 2000; Denman, 2001; Christie & Mason, 2003; Nepal, 2004; Suansri, 2004; Walter, 2004; Laverack & Thangphet, 2007; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2009, Walter 2009.

### **Conclusion**

As a variant of community development, community-based ecotourism projects involve ample adult learning. Sites of learning include community capacity building, the ecotourism curriculum and learning processes. Nonformal education for building community capacity in the development of ecotourism projects is fairly well established as a variant of what is sometimes termed “training for development” or “development education” (e.g. Denman 2002; Suansri 2004). However, comparatively little research or theorizing exists on the development of local and indigenous ecotourism curricula and the various pedagogies employed to teach outside ecotourists. To date, these educational components of ecotourism are largely developed in *ad hoc* fashion, depending on the particular norms and expertise of a given community. Further research on how different ecotourism curricula and pedagogies function in practice, how ecotourists learn, particularly within transformative and decolonizing pedagogies, and with what outcomes, might be particularly valuable.

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