Is ecotourism a socioculturally, economically, and environmentally sustainable way to support the development of mountainous regions and communities?

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Abstract

In this day in age, sustainability is at the forefront in the minds of communities and developers alike. With rates of participation in ecotourism at an all-time high and growing, it only makes sense for the two to collaborate in order to accomplish common goals. This paper aims to educate the reader about both merits and downsides of ecotourism as a means for meeting socio-cultural, economic, and environmentally sustainable development goals of mountain communities. In addition, it explores an idealistic model of ecotourism, and how individual ecotourists, host communities, and the global community can partake in ecotourism endeavors together, and profit as one. I use multiple case studies to allow for the clear visualization of ecotourism and its effects on each of these three stakeholders in action. In addition, I address the issue of ecotourism's lack of a concrete universal and international definition, and further lack of regulatory guidelines. This paper explores how the implementation of these articles is a strategy for maximizing the benefits ecotourism can have. Research shows that when done correctly, true ecotourism can be a viable and tangible practice for supporting mountain communities' development.

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Part I: Introduction

"Ecotourism demands a more holistic approach to travel, one in which participants strive to respect, learn about and benefit both the local environment and local communities" (Bădulescu and Bâc 5). The 21st century is a time of momentous growth in regions all across the world, and promoting values of sustainability in parallel with this growth is more important than ever before. On a surface level, it is in the best interest of the individual to remain self-interested. However, as a global community we must broaden our perspective farther than instant gratification presented by economic advances, to allow for the coexistence of environmental and socio-cultural sustainability. Ecotourism is almost universally defined as a form of sustainable tourism extremism, with the potential to impact the lives of not only the tourist, but the host community, nation, and planet. Two critical components to supporting simultaneous economic, environmental, and socio-cultural development by means of ecotourism are as follows: the tourism must be systems-based, and take a macro-sustainable approach. According to Dr. Weaver of George Mason University, systems-based destinations "look at tourism in combination with agriculture, forestry, urbanization and other systems that operate concurrently within the destination" (4). In addition, in order to successfully adopt a macro-sustainable approach, managers must for example "take into account the fossil fuels consumed by ecotourists traveling to the site, and [not take actions] that would merely displace a negative impact to another location" (Weaver 4).

Ecotourism for the development of mountain communities is worth highlighting as a unique and at times fragile method. Forces such as political instability can have a significant impact on the industry, in addition to more visible concerns such as natural disasters, pollution,

soil erosion, general environmental degradation, and the dangers presented by guiding and working occupations commonly associated with tourism and the outdoor industry. Nevertheless, ecotourism when correctly defined and executed pardons few of these issues, and provides numerous economic, environmental, and socio-cultural benefits. Sherpas in Khumbu can pull their families out of poverty on a guide's salary, and designating locations for mountain ecotourism can protect these wild places as parks and recreation areas for generations to come. Ecotourism that takes a systems-based, macro-sustainable approach is an effective way to support the socio-cultural, economic, and environmental development of mountain communities.

Part II: Historical Context and Background

Pilgrimage, the earliest form of tourism, began more than 2000 years ago and is hardly comparable to today's industrialized tourist services. Nowadays, however, tourism is one of the world's largest industries, and runs rampant in both developed and developing countries. Ecotourism is regarded as an important tool for both socio-cultural and economic growth and development. It is an agent of change, a means for connecting an already small world, and a method for freeing its participants. Be it from the monotony of their daily lives in the case of the tourist, or from poverty in the case of many host communities, ecotourism is beneficial for all who are involved. Even though the idea of "leisure travel" as we know it has been around for little more than a century itself, ecotourism is an even more modern idea. Its roots lie with the "environmental movement" of the 1970s, although it did not grow in popularity until the late 1980s when the concept of sustainable development also took flight. The first definition of sustainable development was published in the Brundtland Report; a report entitled 'Our Common

Future,' and produced by several countries for the UN. "[...] sustainable development is the 'development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs,'" (qtd. in Bădulescu and Bâc 2). Today, although both tourism and ecotourism are still relatively new endeavors, according to recent data published by the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), "the tourism industry accounts for 10.4% of the world's GDP, making it one of the largest economic sectors worldwide." In addition, "1 in every 17 civilian employees is employed in an activity supported by travel expenditures," (qtd. in Bădulescu and Bâc 5).

Focusing in on ecotourism itself, let it be known that ecotourism has been declared the form of tourism with the highest growth rate, as found in Bădulescu and Bâc's "Profile of Ecotourists in Apuseni Mountains Natural Park": "In [the] 1990s ecotourism accounted for approximately 20% of the international tourism and 7% of the total incomes of tourism. In the same period, international tourism had an annual growth rate of 4%, while ecotourism had a rate of 10-30%. In 1994 there were 317 million ecotourists accounting for 250 million dollars" (6). Ecotourism is not a dead-end concept, it already exists, is popular, and just keeps growing. There is so much our world can gain from it in terms of tangibly, monetarily, and economically, as well as socio-culturally and environmentally.

Ecotourists' current goal is pushing our world further from "mass tourism," and towards more sustainable (eco) tourism. Since ecotourism in its purest form is inherently sustainable, the terms can be used interchangeably. The concept seeks to encompass and incorporate all three realms of sustainability into tourism: socio-cultural, economic, and environmental. Sustainable tourism recognizes quality over quantity, and instead of employing tourism practices that could

be likened to an assembly line, ecotourism seeks the "right kind of people" that an area wants or needs in order to optimize the experience for everyone involved. Because ecotourism has an inherent sustainability aspect, in order to truly be considered as such it must meet specific environmental and socio-cultural guidelines. However, as there is not yet a universally accepted definition nor set of regulations or standards, the legitimacy of companies claiming to be "ecotourism" can be difficult to regulate. In Ravinder N. Batta's analysis of three separate Himalayan tourist destinations, he found that none of the locations were actually employing responsible ecotourism practices, and for this reason could not accurately be described as such. However, by identifying specific stakeholders and reforming their industries, these areas as well as many others both national and international have the potential to eventually host true ecotourism.

Commonly overlooked although critical to the definition of true ecotourism is the requirement that ecotourism must be or have an educational learning experience component. This is part of what differentiates it from other forms of nature-based and sustainable tourism, and a big reason as to why it is so functional for development. Unsurprisingly, this is a component of the socio-cultural aspect of sustainability, because of the impacts it has on both tourists and the host community. It is oftentimes regarded that ecotourists' passion for these learning experiences cause them to be more respectful tourists, as exemplified by their eagerness to learn and desire to absorb the native cultures.

Another beneficial element of modern ecotourism is that it can preserve the land. Oftentimes destinations used for ecotourism are designated preserved areas, which without ecotourism could be used for far more damaging endeavors. Even without an official

designation, there is an incentive for people to protect what is bringing in their income, which in these cases may be ecotourism.

Ecotourism's primary focus is not for economic gain, and these socio-cultural and environmental benefits should not be compromised for the sake of money. As expected, this can at times lead to conflict between the three realms of sustainability (socio-cultural, economic, and environmental), because it cannot be a viable tool for development without economic benefits. Fortunately there are numerous, which preserve the existence of ecotourism and with it both the existence of a multitude of natural areas that remain under its protection, and the livelihood of those who make a living servicing tourists.

It is important context to know what kind of sustainability is being discussed, and in the context of this paper, as previously stated, the focus is on systems-based, macro-sustainability. Systems-based sustainability operates with the idea that everything is interconnected, and things cannot simply be doled out as "tourist" or not. It would be impossible to distinguish or draw a line between the two, as things such as agriculture, or roads and trails for example, are utilized by both locals and tourists… so how to know where the erosion is coming from? The systems-based way to answer that question would be to just take the approach of working towards less soil erosion in general, no matter who is causing how much of it, and making the destination more sustainable overall, for all. Similarly, macro-sustainability takes into account the sustainability and the effects of ecotourism not just on the destination or the region, but on other destinations as well as the world as a whole. The last distinguishing quality between types of sustainability, although not a requirement for the development of mountain communities, is whether the methods employed are steady-state or enhancement sustainability. "[steady-state

sustainability] simply means that their management sustains the status quo, [as opposed to] enhancement sustainability, which means that ecotourism activity would result in improvements to the status quo, such as the aforementioned tree planting by ecotourists," (Weaver 3). The utopia of ecotourism would be ecotourism that takes an enhancement sustainability approach in addition to being systems-based and macro-sustainable, however even without the enhancement sustainability component, ecotourism has the potential to aid in the socio-cultural, economic, and environmental development of mountain communities.

Part III: Research and Analysis

The benefits of systems-based, macro-sustainable ecotourism are numerous and extend to providing benefits not only for the development of mountain communities, but for all involved stakeholders. These include the ecotourists themselves of course, as well as the destination hosting the ecotourism (including its residents and local environment), and on a larger scale, even the global community.

Bădulescu and Bâc claim ecotourism is "a friendlier way of doing business," (and they're correct in that description. When travelers participate in ecotourism ventures, they are both supporting the development of the local community and its economy, and deepening their own travel experiences. When an ecotourist visits a destination, they are adventuring not for familiar experiences, as they could have those without ever leaving home. Instead, they are in it for new ones. Kiki Hooton, the Managing Director of Local First in Durango, Colorado, works to support local businesses in her own mountain community. She provided insight into the most pressing issues her organization faces, as well as how sustainable she believes tourism to be for her

region.

While Local First is an organization aimed mostly at keeping locals shopping locally as opposed to places like Amazon, the systems-based aspect of responsible ecotourism demands that there is no disconnect between "for the locals," and "for the tourists." For this reason, one of Durango's latest initiatives is the "Live Like a Local" movement, which inspires (eco)tourists to spend their time in Durango as if this community were their home. This means respecting and being good stewards of the land and trails, in addition to shopping at locals' favorite businesses, eating at their favorite restaurants, and participating in their favorite activities! While having many of these local experiences and adventures are the heart of ecotourism, it can still be draining for a (conventional) tourist to look into, for instance, a new restaurant to eat at when they can just go to the local Wendy's where they know exactly what they're getting into. For this reason, standard or mass tourism is not necessarily an effective way to support the development of mountain communities, as it is simply not enough. However, ecotourism is. What keeps people coming to places like Durango is not their local fast-food chain. Ecotourists love to travel not for the familiar, but for the new experiences, perspectives, and insights they gain from their visitation.

Kiki Hooton's efforts surround her local community and keeping both locals and tourists connected and involved in its climate. However, she doesn't feel the need to incentivize the locals to stay. The overwhelming majority of residents in her local community support her efforts, and remain in Durango because they want to be there. As for when they would like to travel? Despite the environmental detriment international flights and tourism in general can have, she doesn't attempt to stifle the massive gains to be obtained through international travel

experiences. She views tourism as priceless both in her own community and others, and actually wants members of her local community to have these once-in-a-lifetime adventures outside Durango, where they can not only bring Durango's environmentalist values to others, but also return full of new ideas themselves that can later benefit their hometown. This speaks volumes to what can truly be both given and received by the ecotourist. It is very meaningful that the woman heading an organization dedicated to supporting locals in supporting their local community still wants her neighbors to go out and be tourists themselves, despite the environmental consequences that behavior can have.

"Live Like a Local" can be thought of as an ecotourist's movement, because the values of a true ecotourist align with local immersion. According to Bădulescu and Bâc, one of the features of sustainable tourism is that "[ecotourists] are looking for the local characteristics of a destination and in turn the revenues from tourism raise the local value of these assets" (3). In other words, in their pursuit of new experiences, ecotourists are encouraging the aspects of what makes a community unique, whether its environment or culture, and thus raising the monetary value of those aspects. Another notable feature of ecotourism is that it is, as previously mentioned, educational for the tourist. In addition to not only learning about their destination and how to help sustain it, the ecotourist is deepening their own travel experiences and teaching local residents that what they're doing in their community is special, and although it may not seem so on the inside, from the outside looking in it is unique, interesting, and valuable. Finally, the ecotourist can both themself benefit from and benefit others by having a great experience. Should they return home from an incredible trip feeling satisfied and excited, they have the opportunity to, as Kiki Hooton mentioned, bring aspects of what they loved from the destination

back to their local community. This can benefit their home and other residents who may not be so fortunate as to be ecotourists themselves, and aid in connecting our world as a whole. In addition, if applicable, their raving can work to send their friends off to do the same thing, again giving back to their destination by providing more business to the area, and perpetuating the cycle. This is the precise definition of a "win-win…" the ecotourist's adventure can both give to themselves, and give to everyone who interacts with them.

As far as benefits to the mountain community hosting the ecotourist go, again there are an abundance. Ecotourists are oftentimes willing to spend a little more on an experience they can feel good about, whether environmentally or socio-culturally. In general, they are more conscientious of their carbon footprint, and the effect they can have on the natural resources of their destination. Bădulescu and Bâc put it well when stating that "[ecotourists] favor the firms that reduce pollution, energy and water consumption and the use of chemical products" (3). This allows for the preservation of a destination's natural beauty, a reduced environmental impact globally, and can then encourage other ecotourists to do the same on a more international scale.

Because ecotourists hold these environmental values in common, they are more likely to go out of their way to be better tourists. This means being stewards of the land, and employing leave-no-trace ethics in their activities. This can help reduce soil erosion, a prevalent but often overlooked issue of environmental sustainability in mountain regions. Development is inherently bad for the soil and can exacerbate erosion, with agricultural lands eroding more than wildlands. Rural roads and trails erode even more frequently and intensely than either of the former. The removal of vegetation is a significant contributor to the problem of erosion, and the best solution is putting it back because it holds the soil in place. Through experimentation by Wallin and

Harden, researcher Harden found that nearly all roads and trails generate significant runoff extremely quickly into a rain event, while after sustained rain fewer than 50% of undeveloped surfaces continue to generate significant runoff. Roads and trails also don't need as intense of rain to initiate runoff, as opposed to nearby vegetated areas. Soil erosion is a problem for a number of reasons: it can negatively impact agriculture, cause flooding, and alter habitats. Tourists and ecotourists use and rely on roads and trails for both transportation and recreation, and in doing so compact surfaces, increase traffic, and can increase the need for infrastructure. However, good ecotourists are aware of this potential negative impact they can have and will allocate the time, resources, or money to reducing it as much as possible.

Ecotourists are also unique in that they place value in choosing the right services for them. Whether a rafting or rock climbing guide in Durango or a sherpa on Everest, ecotourists prefer to employ and enable local residents, thus stimulating the economy of the whole community in addition to reducing its unemployment rates and encouraging companies to hire locals to give ecotourists the experiences they're asking for. Locals working in the tourism industry are then taking home for their families money, a greater percentage of which will then stay in their community. Because ecotourists prefer to "live like locals," instead of traveling through large-scale tourist agencies where the majority of their wealth is sucked up by a travel agent holed up in an office in New York or San Francisco, their money is transferring directly from their pockets into the pockets of local residents, where it can have a real impact on those families and their community.

Lastly, ecotourists can benefit a local community and its residents with their passion for travel and learning. Because such a huge reason for their trips is the once-in-a-lifetime local

experience, they are more respectful of what they might believe to be drastic and culturally bizarre differences between their home and their destination. Locals may feel pressure to hide their culture and customs around mass tourists, for fear of judgment or lack of understanding. Around ecotourists, however, the locals' "foreign ways" are what makes the experience so special, and even if not entirely understanding, the excitement from an ecotourist can encourage locals to display their identity as a community more freely.

On a larger scale, the global community can spot these positive impacts ecotourism is having on everyone involved, and is thus inspired to broaden the reach of ecotourism. Observing individualized locations each hosting ecotourism of their own can motivate both similar mountainous and non-mountainous communities to do the same in their own homes. Ecotourism gives mountain communities "a way out" of mining and other similarly destructive methods of generating an income off the land. In addition, having examples of properly done ecotourism contribute to the setting of a standard for ecotourism on a global scale, and moves us closer to our goal of having it be clearly defined and regulated.

Given this myriad of benefits of ecotourism, how can we maximize them for the development of mountain communities in the most sustainable way? Although there are hundreds of "ecotourist" (to varying degrees) destinations across the United States and the world, there is no one perfect example to look at. This is in part because what works for one community may not work for another. However, what all successful ecotourist destinations do have in common is that they are majorly self-governed, meaning run by or with the help of the local people.

When thought about in black-and-white, ecotourism exists because of ecotourists, and its

for them above all else. Once broken down, however, it's clear that its purpose is far greater than just that. Ecotourism is a means for pulling entire communities from the reign of poverty, sparking positive social change, and connecting our world. For this reason, all whom it has an impact on must be involved in its operation. This ripple extends outwards from the partnership between the local people and the ecotourist, back to the home of the ecotourist and destinations all around the world. For this reason, ecotourism endeavors should be #1 operated jointly, by everyone involved.

What is another component of successful ecotourism? Bădulescu and Bâc believe that:

> People involved in ecotourism should minimize impact because tourism causes damage. Ecotourism strives to minimize the adverse [effects] of hotels, trails, and other infrastructure by using either recycled materials or plentifully available local building materials, renewable sources of energy, recycling and safe disposal of waste and garbage, and environmentally and culturally sensitive architectural design." (4)

It is the duty of those participating as either a tourist or a host to prioritize the minimization of damage to the natural environment, as well as to new or preexisting manmade infrastructure. This environmental and socio-cultural sustainability aspect is more important to ecotourism than its economic sustainability. Another requirement for the minimization of negative impacts to the destination is the regulation of tourists themselves. Unlike mass tourism, the number of ecotourists should be carefully monitored, in order to not overwhelm the host community and its resources. This is where the "quality over quantity" piece comes in, instead of

just getting as many people in and out as fast as possible in order to generate revenue, the host community is responsible for making sure their visitors aren't doing great damage to their environment, or participating in destructive activities. Ecotourism #2 should be environmentally conscious and responsible.

Thirdly, an idealistic model of ecotourism must, of course, provide some degree of economic and financial sustainability. This is a requirement for supporting any community, including a mountain community, in its growth and development. Without money, there is no growth and no incentive for ecotourism to continue. Ideally, some of this wealth should be used for the preservation of the natural environment, and therefore the ecotourism industry for generations to come. Balance is critical, a balance between money in the pockets of those in the community employed in service work for their ecotourists, and money injected straight into the local economy for the government to spend on the destination's development, the conservation of the environment, and on tangible benefits for the local people. Ecotourism, like any industry, #3 should monetarily boost the development of the host community and better the lives of its residents.

Going hand-in-hand with bettering the lives of local residents is the idea that ecotourism must "raise sensitivity to host countries' political, environmental, and social climate. Ecotourism is not only 'greener' but also less culturally intrusive and exploitative than conventional tourism" (Bădulescu and Bâc 5). Tourism contains an innately unequal distribution of wealth and power, as the vast majority of those who travel and spend money abroad are western, wealthy, and highly educated. This is in contrast to the remote nature of many mountainous ecotourism destinations, which often causes them to be poorer, more isolated, and less educated. For this

reason, it is the responsibility of the ecotourist to respect the destination to where they are traveling and refrain from intruding too much on the autonomy of the community, imposing their unwanted ideals and values on its people, or abusing their wealth and power when it comes to their localized cultures. Ecotourism #4 should not impose on a host community's autonomy, nor should ecotourists abuse their (often greater) wealth and power.

Clearly ecotourism is a great tool, and its inherent sustainability gives many a "so what's not to like?" attitude. Unfortunately, however, it does have its downsides. In the words of Weaver, "it is worth adding that even the most hardcore alternative ecotourist has to participate in the mass tourism industry through airplane travel in order to reach their wilderness destination" (5). Despite the numerous economic and environmental conservation strategies ecotourism takes, the flight to your destination is still putting irreversible carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, and is thus contributing to climate change. In fact, just one intercontinental flight from the United States to Europe generates more CO_2 than the average person in dozens of countries produces in an entire year. There are of course alternative methods of transportation, but many of these are not realistic for those traveling under the constraint of time. Fortunately the responsible ecotourist can find ways of offsetting the carbon cost their flight has on the environment, although that brings us to another valid counterpoint. If ecotourism is like voluntourism… why not just have the locals do it?

Firstly, it is necessary to define voluntourism. Voluntourism is the combination of two words: volunteering and tourism. It represents a controversial form of tourism where people are traveling in order to volunteer or do charity work internationally. Similarly to ecotourism, there are a multitude of positive impacts western voluntourists can have, especially on developing

countries. However, voluntourists can receive some of the same criticism ecotourists do, because the same statistics about the carbon cost of international flights applies to them as well. In addition, voluntourists are often thought of as performing a selfless act for selfish reasons, or in the eyes of philosopher Immanuel Kant, doing the right thing for the wrong reasons. In other words, voluntourists "just want to travel," and they're warranting this desire by helping out internationally in order to feel better about themselves.

The difference between ecotourists and voluntourists is awareness and acknowledgment. Ecotourists are aware of the power dynamic that exists between them and the members of the host community they visit, and they do their best to reduce their impact from all angles. Ecotourists don't arrive at a destination with the intention of changing it, and their goal isn't to give handouts or spread a new system of government, for instance. Instead, an ecotourist travels for the experience, and the education they can receive themselves. It can be argued that in the case of voluntourism the tourists is the teacher, whereas in the case of ecotourism, the tourist is the student.

Is it possible, however, that in the pursuit of new experiences, ecotourists are losing a fundamental component of what makes them ecotourists? "An implication of the growing popularity of trekking is the danger that the nature-based, educational and sustainability criteria, that is, the ecotourism component, will become diluted as operators put more emphasis on thrills and visitor satisfaction," (Weaver 5). Weaver's concerns are legitimate, it is all too easy to cater to the thrill-seeking nature of your guests, and in doing so lose the essence of what makes your services so special, and sustainable. Should this become the case for a previously-ecotourist destination, their label as "ecotourist" should be lost. Consider Mt. Everest and the Khumbu

region, for instance. A trip to Nepal to climb Everest could easily have the "ecotourism" label slapped on it. After all, you are traveling for an experience, to learn from and participate in an activity in nature, and supporting a local guide! However, in doing so you are also damaging the beauty of the natural environment and potentially placing your Sherpa at risk. Recalling back, a fundamental component of ecotourism is that it seeks the "right kind of people" that an area wants or needs in order to optimize the experience for everyone involved. At the moment, just about anyone with 7k in their pocket can climb Everest, which is not seeking the right kind of people. Taking people up the mountain is dangerous, and this risk only grows when the participants are unfit, inexperienced, or disabled. For these reasons, the majority of Everest trips cannot be considered ecotourist. Fortunately, there are ways Everest can convert to true ecotourism in order to solve this problem.

Another criticism of ecotourism for the development of mountain communities may be that there are simply better ways to develop them, such as mining. After all, why should the environment be prioritized over economic development that betters the lives of the local population? I would argue then that sustainability, not environmentalism, is the value up for discussion. Mining and other similarly destructive methods of development are short-term solutions to a long-term problem. Once the resource is gone it's irreversibly gone, and with it the option of ecotourism, as the beauty of the natural environment will have also been compromised.

Part IV: Conclusion

Ecotourism is a socio-culturally, economically, and environmentally sustainable way to support the development of mountainous regions and communities for a multitude of reasons.

First off, it is the most socio-culturally responsible form of tourism, meaning that it holds inherent respect and value for everyone involved. This includes but is not limited to: the ecotourists themselves, the local communities hosting the ecotourism, and the global community where negative environmental impacts are being reduced and forward progress is being made in the realm of expanding ecotourism and its positive impacts to affect more destinations worldwide. Ecotourism is the means to an income for some, and for all, it is a method of further connecting our world both socio-culturally and politically. The educational opportunities presented by ecotourism open doors to its participants, and help to create more well-rounded global citizens. Ecotourism drives positive social change, and there is a clear "ripple effect" of positive impacts it has on all its stakeholders.

Secondly, it is one of the least environmentally destructive methods of development, and overall extremely safe and responsible. Ecotourism values the integrity of both the manmade and natural environments, and recognizes the importance each has to the location and its people. For that reason, it will never compromise those values or amenities of the destination for the sake of economic gain. Due to dependable and conservative visitation monitoring, ecotourism is a safe endeavor for even the most fragile of locations. In addition, it can incentivize the designation of an area as a park or reserve for generations to come.

Lastly, it is economically sustainable because the beauty of the natural world is something that will never lose its value to humans. As long as its integrity is maintained, wildlands will always be prized and desirable for not just ecotourism, but any future development enterprises. The prices of things like oil and natural gas will always fluctuate, and someday with the establishment of electric cars and clean green energy as mainstream and

accessible, these resources will no longer be as necessary. Without a doubt, this will have to happen eventually as these nonrenewable resources will run out. Ecotourism, however, will always have an audience to market to. The development of industries centered around nonrenewable resources is a thing of the past, while ecotourism is a still-growing industry that will flourish for years to come.

Clearly, ecotourism is not without its flaws, but it is the best tool for development nevertheless. As a world, we are in a time of rapid and momentous societal growth and development. The most important priority for us as a society and species should be sustaining it. One of the most weighty detriments to societies and their people is recession, so at the bare minimum, maintenance of the current development we already have is crucial to prevent civilization from all coming crashing down. This world is in need of more industries that can be sustained, and which will last in both the present and the future. Fortunately, ecotourism is if you can recall, a form of "sustainable tourism extremism." Therefore, it is an effective and lasting way to enable and benefit a community.

The next step for the ecotourism industry is to make it international in the sense that the United Nations is getting involved, in order to create a universally agreed-upon definition for the word and set of guidelines that can be regulated and enforced. As previously mentioned, ecotourism can mean something a little bit different to everyone, and therefore companies and destinations can claim to be "ecotourist" when that may not, in fact, be the case, and receive little to no retribution. This "false advertising" can remove some or all of the benefits true ecotourism can have on a community, thus robbing from them their development potential. Naturally, due to ecotourism's relative newness, it is not so strictly defined and understandably so. However, in

order to maximize benefits for both the participating tourists and the development of the host communities, setting stricter internationally-monitored guidelines is the next step in the right direction for ecotourism.

As for the next steps as they apply to research, it is necessary for more research on how we can evaluate the efficacy of ecotourism practices be conducted. More hard data on the topic, its benefits, and how it can best be implemented for optimal results is a must. This research will make ecotourism an easier sell to countries, communities, companies, and broaden its reach internationally.

In addition, more research is required on the long-term sustainability of ecotourism. Due to the unpredictable nature of this world and its happenings, it is necessary for locations that rely on ecotourism for at least a significant portion of their income to diversify their target audiences in order to provide their communities with a "backup plan." Climate change or natural disasters, for instance, can greatly affect the ability of ecotourism to take place and be profitable. In the case of Durango, Colorado, a few warm winters shortened their ski seasons and reduced their number of visitors, and later a large and damaging fire drastically decreased their summer tourism operations. In addition, much of ecotourism and nature travel is seasonal, and these communities must be able to sustain themselves during their offseasons.

Political instability, as well, can have an effect on the ecotourism industry. Countries' governments barring their borders to tourists or these tourists experiencing fear or apprehension about visiting a country at a certain time due to a political conflict can again contribute to ecotourism being unable to sustain itself in a community at all times. This rings true for anything that could prevent visitation, from wars, to diseases, to a global coronavirus pandemic.

The socio-cultural, economic, and environmental advantages of ecotourism are visible and plentiful. Despite its flaws, ecotourism has so much potential for further growth and development in and of itself. With the help of a universally-accepted definition and guidelines enforced by the United Nations, we can better the ecotourism undertaking and broaden its positive impacts. More research on the most efficient ways of conducting ecotourism can also help with its implementation in a greater number of mountain communities, thus diversifying their means of income and leading to more resiliency in the face of a natural disaster or political incident. It is a resounding fact that the benefits of systems-based, macro-sustainable ecotourism greatly exceed its downfalls, enabling it to be an effective method for development socio-culturally, economically, and environmentally for mountainous communities in both developed and developing countries.

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